

A Smile Like Yours

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Summary: Corny Collins was happy to be a bachelor, and hadn't decided to settle down with a particular girl. That was, until the perfect little one showed up right on his doorstep.

1. Surprise!

****Okay, I decided to tone it down with the smut a little, and start something a little less...steamy LOL. Anyway, based on some new found information I was shown, I came up with a fabulous story idea. This is totally different than my other stories, and it's gonna be cute and hopefully funny, so I hope you enjoy! This will end up longer than the other stories I've written so far, so if you like it, let me know!!****

* * *

>Corny Collins sighed and loosened his cufflinks as he tossed his keys onto a side table by the front door, heading towards the kitchen in his small house. He'd been at the studio since early this morning; always the first in, and the last to leave. That was the way it usually went, and he'd grown accustomed to the idea of only coming home long enough to grab a bite to eat, a shower, and sleep before leaving the next day. He perused through the scarce remnants of his Frigidaire, and decided on a wedge of cheese and some crackers that he was sure were no longer fresh.<p><p>

He swallowed his dinner quickly, and then put on a pot of coffee. He never drank all of it, and usually let what was left sit on the counter for a few days until it grew a disgusting green film over it and he was forced to pour it out because of its retched odor. It wasn't that he didn't like a clean house; it was just that, with him living alone, he didn't find much time to clean. He had always taken pride in the fact that he was an established bachelor, and aside from the occasional fling, he'd never gotten serious with a woman. It suited him well enough, though, and for the most part he was glad that he lived alone.

He heard the coffee pot bubbling and sat down at the kitchen table, flipping the newspaper open and browsing the headlines. It seemed like the same thing happened day after day in Baltimore. He would have been tired of it, except for the fact that he liked the routine of knowing what to expect each day. He knew he could come home from the studio, rest his feet for a few minutes, and go back the next day. And since Velma Von Tussle's reign of terror had ended over five years ago, he actually enjoyed work. He had met some of the brightest, sweetest kids that way, and always enjoyed spending his day with them.

He found it amusing when one of the girls from his council would develop a crush on him, and spend what time they didn't use filming the show to find a way to hang around him. It usually happened at least once a month, and this month, it was little Katie Parker, with eyes as dark as chocolate and a heart of gold. She was a cute kid, but that's all she was; a kid. She had just turned sixteen and spent every free moment trying to dance next to him, or smile at him. He had made the mistake once of getting a little too close to one of the girls on the council, but that had been five years ago, and he'd grown up a lot in that time. He had learned from his stupid mistakes and wasn't planning on retracing any steps he'd made then.

He finished his coffee, and folded the newspaper, setting it on top of the kitchen counter that he never used for anything but storing things until they either rotted or became so indistinguishable that he was forced to throw them out. He stood and made his way towards his bathroom, loosening his tie and unbuttoning his jacket on his way. He tossed the articles of clothing onto his bed, and headed towards the shower.

It felt good as the water hit his back, and he stayed in the shower for a lengthy time, enjoying the peace that he could only enjoy now, when he was in his own personal haven.

By the time he got out and toweled off, it was late, and he dressed in his pajamas. He was starting to yawn to himself, and looked forward to the night's sleep he had ahead of him. Dancing all day was exhausting, especially when you no longer had the energy of a teenager. Even though he was only in his early thirties, it had seemed much easier when he'd started the show a little more than eight years ago. But, it kept him in shape, and the ladies liked it, so he made sure he made every rehearsal, no matter what.

Just as he was pulling the sheets back from his bed, the doorbell rang, loudly and clearly. He groaned, and stepped around the bed, making his way down the hall to the front door. He hated having random visitors, especially now. He was already dressed for bed, and unless it was one of his miscellaneous girlfriends dropping by for a good time, he wasn't interested.

He didn't know why, but he peeked through the window on the door before opening it. He couldn't see anyone, and unlocked the door, pulling it open to the warm air of the summer night.

When it swung open, he didn't see anyone, but then his eyes fell downward, to a small child standing right upon the doorstep, smiling brightly at him. Her face looked familiar, but he didn't recognize her. Dark hair spilled out of two high ponytails on her head, and she

stared happily up at him with hazel eyes.

He smiled down at the girl, who couldn't have been older than four or five, and cleared his throat.

"Hi, honey. What are you doing here?" He glanced around, and didn't see anyone whom might be her parents.

"I'm here to see you!" She squealed the words happily, and then jumped excitedly on two tiny feet. "Hi, Daddy!"

2. Proof

Haha! I'm glad you guys are liking this. I like it too. It's a nice change from my usual smuttiness. Anyway, read and enjoy! LOL BTW, I had help with these names so don't sue me if you don't like them LOL

* * *

>He felt the chuckle start deep within him, and let it erupt through his lips. He knelt down to the child's level, and smiled kindly at her.<p><p>

"I'm not your daddy, honey." And although he believed his words, there was something striking about her appearance that made him think twice.

"Yes you are, silly." She rolled her brown eyes playfully at him, and pointed one small finger in his direction. "My name is Sophie Wheeler!" She stared at him expectantly, as if this were common knowledge. He almost asked her to explain herself, and then remembered that she was, at the oldest, five.

"Who is Sophie Wheeler?" He was clueless.

"Me!" She jumped excitedly again, as if it were a game, and lunged toward him, wrapping her tiny arms around his neck. She held onto him tightly, and he let one hand softly pat the back of the blue dress she wore. She clung to him for what seemed like eternity, and he finally pulled her small body back, and looked into her face.

"Where did you come from?" He felt so stupid asking the question, but had no idea what else to say. She giggled softly, holding onto his hands.

"I came from you and Mama, you silly goose!"

He tried to laugh at her innocent words, but felt his heart pound harder with each flutter of her eyelashes, each simple breath she took.

"Who are your Mama and Daddy?" He repeated the question slowly, and she looked at him as if he had two heads.

"My name is Sophie Wheeler," she said each syllable like it was its own word, pausing in between for him to comprehend, "My mama's name is Brenda Wheeler, and my daddy's name is Corny Collins!" She began to prance on her tip-toes. "See? You're my daddy, Corny Collins!"

He straightened his posture, and licked his lips, furrowing his brows down at her. Brenda. He should have known that one day their short affair would come back to bite him in the ass. She'd thrown such a fit when he'd told Velma about her condition and gotten her kicked off the show. He thought he'd made it clear that he didn't want a child. What in the hell was wrong with Brenda for sending this little girl over here like she was an early Christmas present?

"You wanna know how I know you're my daddy?" She said the words like they were a secret, but he found himself nodding in accordance with her. She beckoned him towards her with a small, crooked finger, and reached inside a small bag she had placed on the porch. She picked it up and sorted through it carefully, as if it held the most important treasures in the world. She picked out a piece of paper slowly, holding it between her fingers and away from him. She smiled coyly up at him, holding it to her chest.

"Mama said it wasn't nice to steal," she admitted the words quietly, her eyes glancing towards the ground, "but I just had to take this! It was the only one left, and she hid all the rest of them from me!" She cupped it in her hands, studying it solemnly before holding it out to him.

He reached out to take the picture from her, but she hissed, withdrawing it quickly.

"You look with your eyes, not with your hands, Daddy."

"Okay. I'm sorry. May I see it again?" She liked the softness in his voice, and nodded, holding the picture out to him. It was, obviously, a picture of him, with some added details. He studied the red horns that had been drawn on his head and the long fangs that protruded from his mouth. He frowned. "Why did you color on my picture?"

She looked confused for a moment, and then glanced at the photograph seriously.

"Oh, Daddy, I didn't do that. Mama did."

He wanted to laugh at the seriousness of her words, but couldn't. His heart was beating faster, his mouth was drying up, and he was sure his throat was closing up, but he couldn't find it in himself to laugh. He felt his knees starting to give out as he knelt in front of her, and the child looked worried for a moment.

"Daddy? Are you okay?" She put her hands up to his chest, as if there were something she could do to help his shock. He tried to force a smile at her.

"Uhâ€¦" he thought he might be having a heart attack, "Where's your mama, Sylvie?"

For the first time, she stopped smiling, and frowned harshly at him.

"My name is Sophie." She said the words angrily, and he smiled easily at her.

"Of course it is. Now, where's your mama? Is she here?" He glanced

down at the street.

She broke into the wide grin that he began to recognize as the one he gave the cameras day after day. "No! That's the fun part! She says I'm coming to live with you now! She says it's gonna be so, so groovy!"

"She did, did she?" He took her by the shoulders and steered her in through the front door, into the small living room. He directed her to the couch and instructed her to sit. She sniffed the air, and wrinkled her tiny nose.

"Ew! Daddy, something smells yucky in here."

He murmured something to her and patted a spot on the couch next to him.

"It's okay. That's just the natural smell of my house. Now, I need you to listen to me, and be a very, very good girl, okay?" He watched as she nodded excitedly, placing her hands in her lap.

"I need you to tell me exactly where your mama is." He hoped she would be able to concentrate. She stared at him blankly.

"In the car?" She guessed. He shook his head, and patted her leg encouragingly.

"No, let's try again. Where did your mama tell you she was going? Where did she say you could get her when you wanted her?" He held his breath. She furrowed her eyebrows at him.

"She saidâ€¦" she scrunched her mouth up, and it made her look so much like Brenda that he gasped. She looked frightened for a moment, and then bit on her bottom lip. "She said I was coming to live with you, Daddy. She said you would love me 'cause she said she couldn't do it anymore."

He felt something inside of him break, but wasn't quite sure what it was. Had she actually said that? To her daughter? He wanted to reach out and hold her; she had such a hopeful look on her face that he almost did, before he remembered that he didn't even know this child.

He noticed the bag she was clutching in her hands and ran a hand through his hair, sighing.

"What's that? What do you have in there?" She looked down quizzically, and then began to pull things out without abandon.

"I don't know," she responded, handing him what she pulled out. "Just a bunch of boring old papers."

He glanced down at the papers as she handed them to him, and read them hurriedly. A birth certificate, with tiny feet and hand prints called out to him, and he studied it intensely, desperate to prove the paternity of the child before him. He studied the words on the paper.

****Name: Sophie Anna Wheeler****

****Date of Birth: January 5****th****, 1963.****

****Weight: 7 lbs, 4 oz.****

****Mother: Brenda Marie Wheeler****

****And there, as clear as the rest of the words on the paper, he saw it.****

****Father: Corny Robert Collins.****

Shit.

3. Work

****I just find this so cute I can't stop thinking about it. Anyway, enjoy!****

*** * ***

>

That night was a restless one. Sophie was full of energy, and he had the show the next day. She eventually passed out on his bed and he bunked on the couch, reassuring himself that in the morning, he would figure this all out. Surely, anyone who was thoughtless enough to dump a five year old girl on a doorstep at almost eleven o'clock at night couldn't be that hard to find. And, though he hadn't talked to Brenda since she'd gotten kicked off the show, he assured himself that he'd be able to find her. She'd already done this to him once when she'd gotten pregnant; he'd thought his career, his life was over. She wasn't going to do it again.

It was after two o'clock in the morning that he'd gotten to sleep, replaying the night's events in his mind like a litany. It all seemed too surreal to have actually happened, and he had almost convinced himself that it hadn't, but as the sun began to break upon the horizon, he felt tiny fingers upon him, and heard a soft voice calling him gently.

"Daddy?" She sounded hopeful that he was awake. He, of course, pretended to still be sleeping. She stood silently before him, and the eerie feeling of being watched caused him to peek at her.

"Go back to bed." He mumbled the words, "It's not even light outside yet."

He heard her whimper softly.

"I had an accident and peed, though. The bed is all wet." She sounded like she might cry, and he glanced through his fingers at her, feeling his pulse rate go up. Damn Brenda. Damn her. He did not want this child in his life. He thought he'd made that clear. She was probably doing this as a way to get back at him. She'd lived with the anger inside of her for five years and finally decided to do something about it. She'd hurt him in the best way she knew how.

His anger got him moving, and he let his feet hit the carpet, shuffling to his bedroom. Even in the dim light of morning, he could see a large wet spot on his sheets, and growled under his breath. This was not going to happen every night. As soon as the sun came up, he was going to find a place for her to go. She could not stay here. His life wasn't even child-friendly. Didn't Brenda care enough about her daughter to realize that leaving her with him was the most irresponsible thing she could have possibly done? Besides, of course, sleeping with him in the first place.

He groaned, wiping a hand over his face as he pulled the sheets from the bed. The liquid had seeped into the mattress, and he knew it would stain. He tossed the sheets into a crumpled heap on the floor and thought for a moment. He disappeared into the kitchen and returned a moment later, spreading the old newspaper over the mattress and patting it for her to climb back on. She looked hesitant for a moment, and did so. He went back to the couch and collapsed, falling into a deep sleep for another few hours.

Finally, when the sun had made it into the sky, he awoke again. He didn't see the girl anywhere, and checked in his bedroom. Not there. He followed the sounds of rattling into his kitchen and found her precariously standing on top of a chair, peeking into cabinets.

"What are you doing?" His voice came out louder than he had expected it to, and she stumbled, and almost fell before grasping the back of the chair. She looked like she might cry for a moment, and then steadied herself.

"Daddy, you scared me!" She looked at him accusingly, "That wasn't very nice."

He tried to keep his heart rate down as he looked at her.

"I'm sorry. What are you doing?"

She hopped down from the chair and walked towards him. In the light of the morning, he could see the uncanny resemblance to her mother, and everything he had seen in Brenda during their short affair; everything that had made her beautiful to him. But there was something unsettling about her bright smile, and the way her tiny ears stuck out just a little too far from her head that made him feel sick.

"I'm looking for something to eat. I'm hungry."

He looked down at her, pushing a hand through his dark hair.

"Uh, what do you want? You want a bottle or something?" He had no idea what children ate. He hadn't been around any since Inez had first come to the show, and even then, she was already thirteen. She was eighteen now, and had just graduated from high school. That was a long span of time without knowing any children.

She pushed her hands onto her tiny waist, and glared up at him angrily.

"I am not a baby! I do not drink bottles!" Her tiny face was scrunched up, and he closed his eyes, letting his fingers rub the

bridge of her nose. Dear God.

"Okay, we'll get something to eat on the way to the studio." He said the words without realizing them, and then felt his heart shudder in his chest. He couldn't take her to work with him! She would run around backstage, knock cameras over. He'd be fired. Brenda didn't even have enough courtesy to wait for the weekend to dump her on him, when he would actually have time to figure this out without rushing to work.

"What's a studio?" She followed him out of the kitchen and into his bedroom, her eyes shining with enthusiasm. Her small feet kept her hopping like a bunny.

"Uh, that's where I work, on the show." She followed him into the closet, squeezing her tiny body in between him and his clothes.

"And we get to go there?" She was beside herself with excitement now, her small voice rising in pitch each time she spoke.

"We don't get to go there, we have to go there." He mumbled the words under his breath, but she caught them.

"Why do we have to go? Is it gonna be fun? Mama said she never had any fun on the show 'cause you were an asshole." She grinned up at him innocently.

"Yeah, I bet she did say that." He could think of a few things to say about her right now, too.

He managed to usher her out of the room long enough to get dressed, but she threw questions at him from behind the closed door, and he answered them hurriedly before swooping out, towards the front door, and calling for her to follow him.

"Wait!" She sounded distressed, and he turned to see what her problem was. "Daddy, I'm not dressed!" Her fingers tapped the sides of her pajamas. It had been the only other article of clothing in the bag she'd come with.

"You look fine, let's go!" He had never been late for a rehearsal in his life, and he wasn't about to start.

"I don't look fine! I'm in my pajamas!"

"Well, go put on that blue dress you had on last night." He made a sweeping motion with his hand to get her going, but she continued to sulk.

"Daddy, I spilled something on it! I can't wear it today; people will think I'm slutty." It made him wonder what other words Brenda had taught her.

"That's not what makes you slutty, honey. It's what you do when you take your clothes off that makes you slutty." He knew he shouldn't have said it to her, but it was too late, and the words had escaped his mouth. She thought this over for a moment, and then nodded.

"Okay, but I still can't wear my dress. It's got something yucky on

it." She tapped her foot impatiently, and his mind raced. He didn't even know anyone with children; how could he possibly ask for help with clothes? An idea hit him suddenly, and she followed him as he rushed into his closet, pulling out one of his dress shirts.

"Here," he suggested hopefully, "Wear one of my shirts."

She began to giggle. "Daddy, that's a boy's shirt! I can't wear it!"

"No, look," he corrected her gently, rolling up the sleeves so that her hands would poke out. "You can make it into a dress, just for you." He was glad no one was around to hear him.

She hesitated, and then pointed a tiny finger up at a hanger in the closet.

"I want to wear the purple one."

4. Maybelle

I'm having so much fun with this story. I'm not sure how long it's going to turn out, but the next few chapters or so are going to get interesting so keep reading! Thanks to everyone who is reviewing!

* * *

>By the time he pulled into the studio's parking lot, he was already fifteen minutes late. She'd had trouble buttoning all the buttons on the shirt, and he'd eventually had to help her. He'd tied one of his belts around her skinny waist so that his shirt didn't dangle lifelessly on her small body. When they reached the studio, she was quick to remind him that he still hadn't gotten her anything to eat, so he promised that as soon as they got inside she could help herself to the breakfast table backstage. The thought excited her, and she chattered excitedly as she followed him from the car and into the building.<p><p>

When they reached the soundstage, he heard her gasp behind him, and hurried into rehearsals, leaving her to scurry after him. She stayed at the edge of the stage, watching in amazement as he began to dance in rhythm with the dozens of other people. She started to move her body along to the rhythm, and heard a squeal behind her. She turned quickly, and saw a large, dark skinned woman heading towards her. She was wearing a bright smile, and Sophie smiled back at her.

"Well, honey, aren't you sweeter than sugar?" She bent to study the child's face, "What are you doing here?"

"Dancing," she responded nonchalantly, still moving her body. The dark skinned woman laughed.

"I've never seen you here before." Her voice was kind. "I'm Miss Maybelle. What's your name, little one?"

"Oh, I've been here before, but I was in my mama's belly, so you probably don't remember seeing me. I'm Sophie Wheeler!" The woman laughed, and a buzzer sounded. Sophie turned quickly, and saw Corny

walking towards her and the woman behind her briskly. She smiled up at him.

"Oh, I love how you dance, Da-" He hoisted her under his arm and took Maybelle's arm with his free hand, leading them back to his dressing room. The woman walked alongside him without question, and when he got to the room, he placed Sophie on her feet and closed the door behind them. For a moment, they stared at each other in silence, and then Sophie broke into the easygoing smile he almost wondered if she'd been born wearing.

"Can you teach me to dance like that, Daddy?" She let herself spin on her feet, and grinned excitedly between him and Maybelle. Corny's eyes met Maybelle's as her mouth dropped open.

"What?" She said the word slowly, and he winced. She glanced quickly down at the little girl, and then back up at Corny. "What's she talkin' about, boy?"

He sighed, and bit on his lip as Sophie watched them intently. He took Maybelle's arm and led her away from the child, speaking to her in hushed tones.

"She showed up on my doorstep last night. She said her mother wants her to live with me." His eyes fell on hers, and she understood suddenly. He'd discussed the Brenda situation with her, and she had been a silent ally through it all. She'd chastised him for being so foolish, but had agreed not to divulge the information with anyone. However, from the way the rest of the Council girls had looked at him for the rest of their time on the show, he was sure Brenda had told them all, anyway. They'd regarded him with a coldness that told him they knew he'd put their friend into the situation she was in. He'd never expected it would turn out like this.

"Maybelle, please," he looked at her with pleading eyes, "I just need youâ€¦can you just, take her so I can rehearse? Get her something to eat, or, I don't knowâ€¦anything. I'm justâ€¦I need to figure this out before I can think straight."

She hesitated, and glanced down at the smiling child, before agreeing.

"Okay. I don't know what you're gonna do about this, boy, but you better think quick," she leaned in closer to him, letting her voice drop, "This isn't just gonna go away. You need to figure out how to deal with this."

"Oh, I'm going to," he vowed the words, "I'm going to find Brenda, and I'm going to get this kid back to her." He started to leave, and then stepped back. "And make sure you keep her in this room. I don't need her blabbing to everyone."

Maybelle grunted in response, and Corny shot her an apologetic look before glancing down at Sophie, and disappearing from the room without another word.

"Daddy?" She watched him go, and then looked up at Maybelle. The woman grinned and knelt down to her level.

"How's about we get some food in that little belly of yours? Do you

like donuts?" The child grinned brightly in return.

"Oh, groovy! I love donuts, especially the kind with the sprinkles on them!"

"Well, you're in luck, 'cause I just saw some on the breakfast table. Why don't you stay here, and I'll go get you one? Would you like some orange juice, too?" Maybelle watched as the girl climbed onto the couch and sat with her hands in her lap.

"Oh, yes, please!" She licked her lips excitedly, and Maybelle nodded, shutting the door behind her as she left the room. By the time she'd gathered a donut, an apple, and some orange juice onto a plate for the child, she noticed that the door to the dressing room was cracked open slightly, and pushed her way in. She was surprised to see Inez inside, chatting casually with the dark haired child.

"Inez, what are you doin' in here? Get out there and dance." Maybelle tried to shoo her as she sat the plate on a table and beckoned the little girl over.

"I was just walkin' by and she called me in! Who is this little girl, Mama?" Inez smiled at Sophie as she sat down to a small table, greedily biting into her donut. Maybelle tried to hush her.

"She's none of your concern, that's who. Now go." Inez rolled her eyes and turned to leave before stopping to glance back at her.

"Well, whoever she is, I like her." She smiled sweetly at the little girl.

"I'm Sophie Wheeler," she managed to get out between mouthfuls of donut, "My daddy is Corny and my mama's a slut."

Inez burst into laughter at her words, shaking her head and disappearing through the door. Maybelle sat at the table across from Sophie, watching her carefully.

"You know, child, it's not nice to use words like that. Especially not about your mama." Lord only knew; Corny had probably been calling her that to this child's face, but that didn't make it right.

Sophie shook her head thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't use mean words about my mama," she stated truthfully, licking chocolate icing from her fingertips, "Never, ever!"

Maybelle rested her elbows on the table.

"Do you know what slu--eh, that word you just said, means, baby?"

Sophie shook her head slowly, her wide eyes watching her carefully.

Maybelle sighed. "I didn't think so. Let's not say that word anymore. Can you promise me that?"

Sophie smiled sweetly and nodded.

"Good." Maybelle felt her heart melt at the innocence on the little girl's face. "So, why don't you tell Miss Maybelle all about you and your family?"

"Sure," Sophie took a sip of her juice and wiped her hands on a napkin, "I'll tell you everything I know about my daddy. I just love that bastard."

5. Station Manager

****Thanks for all the reviews, everyone!****

* * *

>"All right, guys, let's call it a day. Good job." He sighed, and the council kids scattered around him in every different direction. He heard them chattering happily to one another, making plans for the weekend and giggling over secret jokes. He secretly wished for that time of his life; when he could make careless plans without worrying about whether or not he'd be able to follow through with them. It seemed like so long ago, and yet it had been less than twenty-four hours.<p><p>

He thrust his hands into his pockets and kicked a scuff mark on the floor, smiling at the kids as they passed him on their way out the door. Now he would have time to think. He had convinced Maybelle to take the child out shopping, so that he could have his shirts back, and she had obliged. Sophie had, of course, been thrilled at the prospect of shopping for new dresses. He had given Maybelle a wad of cash and had been happy to see them go.

"All right," Maybelle had said, taking Sophie's hand in hers and swinging her cheerfully towards the door, "Miss Maybelle and Miss Sophie will find some beautiful dresses." She had turned her around like a ballerina, Sophie had giggled, and Maybelle had looked directly at Corny, speaking in hushed tones. "Okay. You've got your time. You do whatever you have to do to make sure this little girl's going to be taken care of." He didn't want to admit it, but her tone had scared him, and he had swallowed the lump in his throat. He'd finished his rehearsals and began to walk away from the soundstage and towards his dressing room.

He tried to drown out the beating of his heart in his ears, and concentrated on the steady click, click of his dress shoes as they hit the floor. He tried to keep his eyes on the ground, his mind whirring with everything he needed to do. He'd have to see what else was inside that bag of Sophie's, maybe Brenda had left a phone number, an address, something. What kind of person could just walk away from their child? That thought put a layer of guilt on him, and he had to push it away. He couldn't think about the mistakes he'd made. This was Brenda's problem, not his.

"Well, well, well." He heard the voice, and something inside of him recognized it. It sounded so eerily familiar, but he couldn't place it. He tried to run it through his mind. Was it a council girl? It couldn't be Maybelle; this voice was much too high-pitched to belong to her. He turned quickly, and felt a cold chill rush down his spine

as his eyes fell upon her face. It had been over three years since he'd seen her, and she looked exactly the same. Except for the fact that her hips had grown a little, and her waist was slimmer, he would have thought that no time had passed at all. He felt a catch in his throat, and tried to clear it out. She smirked at him.

"Corny." Her greeting was cold, and she watched him with eyes that were as blue as ice.

"Amber," he tried to sound as icy as she had. He searched his mind for the right words. "How have you been?" He didn't care how she'd been. His fists curled into tight balls by his side, and he bit down on his tongue. Three years between him and the ice princess hadn't been enough time. He could have gone a lot longer without seeing her.

"Just fantastic," her words were tight, "You won't believe what three years can do for a person."

"You'd be surprised," he said the words quickly, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"So, you're still here, huh? Prancing around with teenagers?" She smiled tightly, her hands on her slim waist.

He cleared his throat, and tried to focus on the cufflinks on his shirt.

"Gee, Amber, how old are you now? Eighteen?" He smirked at her, and she pursed her lips together in indignation.

"Twenty-two," she shot back quickly, and then caught herself. "Not that it's any business of yours. I don't have to answer to you, anymore."

He let himself smile at her. "Of course not, Amber. So, tell me, why have you decided to grace us with your prescence today?"

The smug look returned to her face quickly, and she grinned.

"Oh, just observing."

He nodded, and suddenly wanted nothing more than to be away from her.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, your highness, I really must be going." He mocked a bow to her, and she sneered at him. He shot her a disdainful smile and started off. He could feel her eyes watching him as he walked, and congratulated himself on making her falter. It still felt good to mock her, after all these years.

He shut his dressing room door behind him and collapsed on the couch, digging his hand into the bag Sophie had left in his room. He pulled out the papers. Birth certificate, a coloring book, nothing. No address, phone number, no clue as to where she was or why she'd made this brilliant decision. He'd always known that Brenda had been ditzy, but he'd never dreamed she'd be so ignorant.

There was a rap at his dressing room door, and he sighed, calling out for the person to enter. For a moment, he was afraid it was Amber,

but when the head of the familiar man poked through, he smiled welcomingly.

"Hey, Paul." He rose to meet the prescence of the man who had taken over the position of station manager after Velma had been fired. He'd made his job a joy for the last five years. It was a vast difference from the tight clutch Velma had held on him.

"Corny," the man greeted him, "Listen, I need to tell you something."

Corny felt a lump in his throat, and began to worry. Had he found out about Sophie somehow? She had such a big mouth, he wouldn't be surprised if she'd blabbed, just like her mother had told everyone everything.

"Uh, okay." He waited for the words, to be fired, or sent to jail for impregnating a teenage girl so many years ago. Instead, the man smiled, and clapped him on the back.

"I'm leaving, Corny. I'm being transferred up to New York, to work with a station there. I wanted you to be the first to know."

The news hit him hard, but he was relieved not to be in trouble.

"Oh, no! Why?"

"Better pay, better job," the man listed the reasons on his fingers, "It's going to be a big break for me."

Corny swallowed hard, and then smiled.

"Well, it sounds like a great opportunity. Congratulations. You know we'll be sad to see you go, though." The man nodded graciously at him, and Corny patted his shoulder. "So, when will they start looking for a replacement?"

The man looked surprised suddenly. "Oh, you didn't know? They've already found someone."

"Really? Who is he?" He was afraid for a moment, and then dismissed his foolish thoughts. As long as Velma wasn't making a comeback, no one could be half as bad.

"You may already know her. She's-" The man stopped as they heard the gentle click of high heels on the floor, and turned to the woman who had come to stand beside them in the doorway.

"Her?" Corny spit the word like it was poison, his eyes falling upon the pink high heels that had come to stand before him.

He let his eyes travel up her body, and felt a flush over his face as she grinned sardonically at him.

"May I introduce your new station manager, Miss Amber Von Tussle."

Thanks so much to everyone who is reviewing! A few of you have left reviews and are rather disappointed that Amber is in this story, but I'm not really sure what to tell you. I like her character, and I like writing about her, and I created the story with her in mind. If you don't like the idea of her being in this story, I'll be sorry that you stop reading, but I'll understand. Amber does have a part in this story, though, and I intend to keep it that way. As for those of you who aren't disappointed, please enjoy!

* * *

>"And then there's this one," Sophie twirled in the fifth dress she'd tried on in her impromptu fashion show. She placed her hands on her hips and walked sassily to one end of the small living room. "What do you think about this one, Daddy? Miss Maybelle said it looks like something the girls who dance your show wear."<p><p>

He looked up from his daze, and offered her a half-smile.

"Yeah, it's fine." He was ignorant to the fact that his words didn't suit her, and she sighed despairingly, flopping down next to him on the couch and crossing her arms.

"I'm hungry." She kicked her feet playfully, watching his face. "What are we going to eat for dinner?"

"You're always hungry," he felt like he was whining, and then glanced down at her. She shrugged nonchalantly.

"Even Mama used to get me dinner."

He sighed, glancing down at his watch. It was already after nine o'clock. He hadn't remembered eating anything today. Between the surprise at the station, and his worries about finding Brenda, he had forgotten all about it. He'd had to hide his despair at the thought of Amber being his new boss, and simply thinking about the fact that he'd be in her control made him feel ill. He remembered Maybelle telling him that she had fed her lunch, but that was three o'clock this afternoon. He wondered if he could call her up now.

He rested back against the couch, and she sat silently beside him in her new dress. He let his head fall into his hands and then heard the hungry growl of her stomach beside him. He groaned inwardly, and looked at her.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," she nodded, and he realized it was the quietest she'd been since she'd arrived.

"Okay. Let's go get something to eat."

They arrived at a small diner about a half hour later, and a smiling hostess led them to a small booth towards the back of the restaurant. Sophie climbed into one side of the booth and he slid into the other, picking up a menu and inadvertently covering his face with it. He studied it intensely, and then lowered the menu to look at her confused face.

"What? I thought you were hungry."

She nodded. "I am."

"So, then look at the menu."

Her tiny fingers pulled a menu towards her, and laid it on the table in front of her, studying it with deep concentration. She ran her fingers over the words, mouthing inaudible words to herself. He put his menu down.

"What do you want?"

She stared harshly at the menu, and he noticed her lower lip was trembling. He felt the panic start to rise in his throat as she whined softly.

"No, Sophie. No, don't cry. What's wrong with you?" He didn't want to make a scene. Granted, there was only a skeleton crew in the diner, but he didn't want to draw attention to them.

"I don't know what I want," her words were a soft whimper.

"Why not?" He felt angry suddenly. Why was she making this so difficult? Didn't she realize that all she had to do was-

"There are no pictures, and I don't know how to read!" She moaned dramatically, glancing up at him with glossy hazel eyes. "I can't learn to read until I start school!"

He suddenly felt foolish, and bit his lower lip. She frowned up at him, frustrated.

"That's okay, never mind. Just tell me what you want." He just wanted to get this over with. Then maybe he could figure out what to do next.

After he'd ordered a grilled cheese and milk for her, he sipped a cup of coffee while they waited for their food. She watched him with wide eyes, asking excited questions about anything that popped into her mind.

"Do you love dancing, Daddy?"

"Yes."

"Do you love singing, Daddy?"

"Yes, Sylvie."

"Sophie!" She was angry again, and he frowned up at her.

"Right, Sophie."

She was quiet for a moment, and then tapped on her chin with her pointer finger.

"Daddy, I can remember your name, and Miss Maybelle's name. I think you should try to remember mine." She studied him seriously while she spoke. He looked up at her and swallowed a mouthful of

coffee.

"Okay, I'll try to remember." She smiled.

"Good. Mama said you should always remember someone's name."

He grunted in response. He wish she would have forgotten his.

"Oh!" Her voice was squeaky and excited suddenly, "I almost forgot!" She reached deep into a pocket on the front of the dress and pulled out a folded piece of paper, handing it across the table to him. "This is a letter from Mama!"

He snatched it quickly from her tiny hands as the waitress brought the food to the table. Sophie excitedly bit into her grilled cheese as he unfolded the piece of paper and began to read it silently.

"Read it! I want to hear what Mama said!" She ate happily as he glanced up at her. He began to read the letter softly to her.

Corny,

I hope you've enjoyed the last five years of your life, because you're in for a rude awakening. _Since I was booted from the show, I've spent every day_-

"Daddy, louder! I can't hear you!" She yelled the words at him through a mouthful of cheese, and he glared up at her.

"Shh! You can't yell inside. Just let me read it."

"No!" She squealed again, "I want to hear what Mama said!" A couple in a booth a few rows back had begun to look at them.

"Fine!" He snapped the words at her, and she quieted, chewing thoughtfully on a piece of bread. He cleared his throat and began to read louder.

I've spent every day in a living hell raising the child that was an accident. I tried to contact you, but of course I could never reach you. I can't stand to be around her. Whenever I look at her, all I see is your disgusting face. Take your disgusting little girl, and enjoy the living hell of everything she is.

He said the words so quickly that he didn't have time to digest them, or think about their connotations. He finished the last few sentences silently, his hands shaking in rage. He sat the paper down, and glanced at Sophie, who placed her sandwich back on her plate silently, her small face pale and so desolate that he didn't recognize her.

"I'm not hungry anymore."

The realization hit him suddenly, and something inside of him snapped. He felt a blush creep into his cheeks as he folded the letter and stuffed it into his pocket, glancing around for the waitress. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he glanced worriedly down at the child, who had withdrawn into herself.

"Hey," he tried to make his voice as soft as he could. She didn't look up at him. He wanted to reach out and touch her tiny fingers, but curled his fists together so that he wouldn't be tempted. "Your mama didn't mean those things about you."

She had her head lowered still, and raised it up only enough to speak to him.

"Mama said she never lied. Never, ever."

Corny sighed to himself. Brenda had also said that she'd been on birth control medication. So much for that.

"Listen to me, Sophie," he spoke in such a definitive voice that she lifted her head to look at him. "You never let anyone make you think you're not good enough. You hear me?" He swallowed loudly as she watched him with wide eyes, nodding slowly.

"Yes, Daddy. I hear you."

"Good." He let his eyes drift to his coffee cup again, and her lips curled into a weak smile.

"Hey, Daddy."

He glanced up at her.

"You remembered my name." She still looked sad, but there was a new hope in her eyes, and she smiled gently at him.

Corny raised the coffee cup to his lips to conceal the subtle way he felt the corners of his mouth turning up into a smile.

7. Amber

Sophie sat at the small table in Corny's dressing room, coloring on a piece of paper. She swung her legs beneath the table as she listened to the bustling just beyond the door, and looked up cautiously when she thought someone was trying to enter the room. Corny had told her to stay put in his room until after they were finished with rehearsal, and then he would have Miss Maybelle get her lunch. She'd spent this past weekend at the house with Daddy, but he had called Miss Maybelle up for every little thing. Sophie didn't mind. She liked Miss Maybelle; she reminded her of what a grandma should be like. She'd never had a grandma before, because Mama had told her that her grandma was mad at her for being born. Sophie didn't think that was very fair, since she couldn't help that she was born, but she'd never questioned Mama about it. She always seemed angry enough as it was.

As Sophie scribbled a picture of a house with the sun shining above, she thought about her mother, and the letter she'd written to Daddy. She wondered if she really meant all those mean things, but didn't want to believe that she did. She'd always been a good girl for Mama, and never sassed her. She had always looked so tired that Sophie didn't want to make her any more mad or sad than she usually was. Mama had never hit her, but the way she would clam up and not talk to her for days at a time made her feel even worse than being hit.

Anyway, she didn't mind being in trouble if Mama hugged and kissed her after, and told her everything was okay. But that had never happened either.

She began to color the dress of the little girl in her picture, when the dressing room door opened and a woman with blonde hair poked her head inside. She started to shut the door again, but then her eyes caught on Sophie. She pushed the door open a little wider and pushed her thin shoulders through the opening.

"Who are you?" Sophie didn't like her tone, and glared up at the woman.

"Sophie Wheeler," she answered her question, "Who are you?"

Amber furrowed her brows at her.

"I'm the station manager." Her voice was flat.

"Oh! Hi, bitch." Sophie went back to her coloring without skipping a beat. Amber coughed.

"Excuse me?"

Sophie looked up, her eyes full of confusion.

"That's your name, isn't it? That's what my daddy's been calling you."

Amber narrowed her eyes, inhaling quickly.

"Who is your father?" Sophie could see the anger in her eyes, and the tone of her voice reminded her of the way her mother used to speak to her when she was upset. She tried not to show that she was frightened.

"Corny Collins," her voice was small, and she was clutching the crayon tightly in her small fist. She couldn't detect the emotion that passed over the woman's face as she digested the words.

"What?" she sounded like she was choking on the word, "Corny?"

Sophie nodded obediently, and Amber pushed the door wide open to step inside.

"Wait a minute. Wheeler?" She tossed the name around in her head, and Sophie watched her carefully. "Wheeler?!" She almost screamed the word this time, and Sophie flinched. "How old are you?"

"Five," she was almost afraid to say the word, with the reaction she'd had to everything she'd said so far. "How old are you?"

Amber ignored the question, and pointed an accusing finger at her, her jaw slack with shock.

"Oh my God! _You!_" Sophie watched the woman's face contort into a sarcastic grin. "Your mother is Brenda."

She nodded again. "Yes."

Amber gasped so loudly that Sophie lurched.

"Oh my God," her breath was released slowly, and she glared at the child. "Youâ€¦!" She let her voice fade, and Sophie noticed a familiar head poking through the space in the door behind her.

"Daddy!" She squealed the word loudly, and Amber moved from behind the door, stopping him as he turned to enter the room.

"What are you doing here?" He briefly forgot that she was his boss now, and spoke with a hard edge to his voice.

She scowled at him.

"I think the appropriate question is; what were you doing in here?" He glanced at Amber, and then glanced down at Sophie who sat watching him with wide eyes. Shit.

"Get out," he narrowed his blue eyes at Amber, and watched as she stiffened her back. A tight smile began to curve her lips.

"You can't speak to me like that, I'm your-"

"I said get out." He made the slightest advance toward her, and suddenly, it didn't matter that she was his superior. He was still a man, and stronger than her. She shrunk back, and withdrew into herself. It was obvious that she was trying not to let him notice, but he had. It reminded him of when she'd annoyed him on the show. There was so much that was similar to those times; except for the fact that she was legally considered an adult now and, technically his boss, things were exactly the same. She was still an unnecessary pain in his ass.

She snaked around him, but glared at him through the crack in the door.

"This isn't going to go unnoticed, you arrogant-"

Slam. He shut the door in her face, and pushed it into a locked position behind him. He didn't care if she had the reigns of his career in her hand. He felt an annoyance bubbling up inside of him, and glanced down at Sophie.

"What was she doing in here?" His voice was angry, and she looked up at him fearfully.

"I don't know. She just came in." Sophie usually enjoyed having visitors in the confines of the dressing room, but the woman with blonde hair and eyes as cold as ice had reminded her of a wicked witch that her mother used to tell her stories about; one that made all the girls and boys in school shudder when she walked past. It left a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, and she didn't like the way her father looked so upset right now.

He ran a hand through his hair, his chest rising and falling with a loud sigh.

"Jesus." He groaned inwardly, "And you just had to tell her who you were, didn't you?"

Sophie shrugged carefully, her stomach doing uncomfortable flip-flops.

"She asked." It was the truth.

"Sophie," he said her name carefully, but from the unhappy tone in his voice, she knew better than to get excited about the fact that he hadn't mistaken her name one time over the whole weekend. "You don't _always_ have to tell everyone who you are. Do you understand me?"

She swallowed and nodded, but she didn't understand. Something about the way he was looking at her, though, told her that he didn't feel like explaining it to her.

"Don'tâ€|" he took a breath, "just don't go around telling everyone you meet who you are. Not _everyone_ needs to know that I'm your.â€|" he seemed to have trouble saying the word, "That I'm yourâ€|.you know."

"My daddy?" She had to ask, because she wanted to make sure she was following him. He nodded stiffly.

"Yeah, that."

She wanted to accept it as it was, but couldn't.

"But why not?" She said the words, and he looked at her strangely. "Why don't you want people to know?"

He watched her intensely with his blue eyes, and then cleared his throat, kneeling down to her level.

"How about we play a game? Let's pretend that I'm not your daddy when we're here, in the studio. How does that sound?" He looked at her hopefully.

She sat watching him, confused. She didn't like the idea of that game. She'd spent her whole life not knowing him, and now he wanted her to pretend she still didn't know him? She was pretending not to have a Mama, or a Daddy? The thought upset her, but she tried not to cry, because he was looking at her with so much hope in his eyes.

"Okay," she nodded softly, and his face broke into a huge grin. She didn't feel like smiling. "Who am I, then?"

He thought for a moment.

"We'll think about that later. Right now, I _really_ need to get back to rehearsals. Can you stay in here?"

She wanted to cry, and kick and scream, but knew it wouldn't do any good. She'd already learned from Mama that crying didn't change anything. Even when she'd scraped her knee or stepped on something that made the bottom of her foot throb, crying didn't help. It didn't make anyone, especially Mama, love her more. It usually only made things worse.

He disappeared out the door, and she sat silently on her stool. She propped her tiny head into her hands and wished, for the first time, that she had a different Mama and Daddy. A Mama that would take her to the park, and push her high on the swings; a Daddy that would carry her on his shoulders and proudly announce to anyone they met that she was his little girl. A Mama and Daddy who loved each other, and who kissed each other goodnight after reading her a bedtime story and tucking her in. She'd heard about families like that in stories, and saw a glimmer of it in Miss Maybelle's eyes. She knew that somewhere, there were people like that; people who weren't afraid to love each other, or her.

8. Cry

Hey everyone! I had a great birthday, thanks to everyone who sent me birthday wishes! I saw Hairspray again today and got inspired to write a new chapter, so here it is. Hope you enjoy!

* * *

>A few weeks had passed since Sophie had shown up on his doorstep, but things hadn't gotten any better for Corny. He hadn't gotten any closer to finding Brenda, and Sophie was still sleeping in his bed, which meant he was still sleeping on the couch, and his body was taking a toll. He found it harder to get up every morning, and there was often a pain in the small of his back that he couldn't rub away. She would wake him up every morning, before the sun rose, and ask him to fix her breakfast. He always told her to go back to sleep, and she would retreat into his room dutifully, until she heard him stirring in the living room and joined him.

Brenda was the first thing he thought about when he woke up in the morning, and the last thing he thought about at night. Finding her had become his obsession. He'd even tried to talk a friend of his, who was a police officer, into having someone find her. When that hadn't worked, he had grown frustrated, and had taken his anger out on Sophie, yelling at her until she was close to tears. He'd felt bad about it afterwards, but he had never bothered to apologize to her.

His life was peppered with annoyances, and everything made him angry. Amber had finally taken over as the actual station manager, and ran circles around him all day, dizzying him with every order she barked, every annoying glance she gave him. Sophie was constantly on his heels, asking questions about everything he did, and everything she saw. She was slowly killing him inside with every innocent observation she had, every curiosity that she looked to him to fulfill for her.

Maybelle had been a help, of course, but had eventually told him, in so many words, that she was not Sophie's nanny and didn't get paid to take care of her. She enjoyed spending time with her, but hoped that Corny didn't expect her to raise her for him. Of course, that had disappointed him just a little, though he never would have admitted to it. Maybelle had seemed shocked that Corny hadn't found himself bonding with Sophie at all, and, in all honesty, he felt somewhat the same way. He wanted to love her; he knew it was what he should do, but whenever he looked at her, he saw all of the things Brenda had seen in her; _hate_, _resentment_, _everything that was bad with the

world._ He wasn't exactly sure how he saw any of those things in the smiling child with dark features, but he did, and most days, he couldn't even stand to look at her. She was so hopeful, so expectant, that it broke his heart to dissect his feelings for her. The truth was, he still didn't see any good in her; when he looked into the hazel eyes that she had gotten from Brenda, he only saw a damning fate for himself.

Because it was late May, and school wasn't in session, he had no one to watch Sophie all day while he worked. And though he didn't mind keeping her locked inside his dressing room, too many people were becoming intensely curious as to whom the little girl who had suddenly become his shadow was, so he'd enrolled her in a daycare program that was located across town. He'd dodged his co-workers' questions thus far, and for some reason, Amber hadn't blabbed the secret to everyone she saw. In fact, from the way people regarded him, he assumed that she hadn't told anyone. That fact, in itself, made him anxious. He couldn't figure out why the girl who had never been able to keep anything a secret hadn't betrayed him yet. It surely meant that she was waiting for the perfect opportunity to destroy him. That was how her mind worked.

Since Sophie had arrived, Corny had been getting to the studio by eight each day, and usually didn't leave until six o'clock that evening. The daycare where she stayed was only open until six, so after he slipped out of work early, he would shoot across town to pick her up. For the past week, he'd been ordering them take-out food for dinner, and they ate in front of the television. Not exactly the classiest dining experience, but he had given up on class long ago; he assumed it was somewhere around the time he'd slept with Brenda.

He headed back to his dressing room after the show one day to get the suit jacket he'd left draped over a chair when the devil incarnate appeared before him, smiling tightly at him.

"Corny." She spat his name at him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Uh, home." He started to push past her and into his dressing room. The fact that she controlled his career hadn't sunk into his mind yet, and it was hard to imagine her as anything more than the obnoxious teenager that had danced on his show just five short years ago.

She stepped into his way as he tried to push past her, and puffed her shoulders and chest out in an attempt to make herself look more intimidating.

"I don't think so." She pursed her lips together, and he arched an eyebrow at her.

"What do you mean?"

She let a cool smile cross her painted lips, and put her hands on her thin hips.

"I control your career now, and I say you're not going. I need you to do some things for me before you scamper out that door."

He managed to escape close to an hour and a half later, cursing Amber's name as he finished all the menial tasks that she could have had anyone with a brain do. He knew she hadn't wanted his help; she'd simply wanted to know that, if even for the briefest moment, she had him in the palm of her hand, completely within her control. He had driven almost twice the legal speed limit across town to the daycare where he knew Sophie would still be waiting. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was spend time with the precocious five-year-old, but he didn't have much of a choice. He was sure that if he could find a daycare to keep her overnight, he'd put her in it. Unfortunately for him, he hadn't been able to.

He came to a screeching halt in the parking lot, letting his feet carry him up the steps of the building and inside, where an elderly man in a janitor's uniform was silently mopping the tile floor. He glanced around quickly, and noticed the little girl sitting quietly on a bench just outside a small office. He hesitated for a moment and studied the sad look on her face. Just for a moment, something inside of him felt for her, but he brushed away the guilt quickly and moved toward her.

"Hey," he greeted her with a lazy smile, and she looked up at him, her face drawn into a look of frustration. The seriousness of her expression shocked him, and he tried to laugh it off. "I had a bad day at work."

She didn't say a word, but stood up and began towards the front doors of the building and into the parking lot. It took him a moment to follow her, and when he found her she was already sitting in his car, her arms folded over her chest. He climbed into the driver's seat beside her and started the car, unsure why he felt so anxious about the upset look on her face.

"What do you want for dinner?" He started down a main street, and glanced back and forth at the restaurants that lined the streets. When she didn't answer after several minutes, he glared at her. "Hey, what's your deal?"

She turned quickly to him, the eyes that were usually so full of hope and optimism brimming with tears. He felt a knot in the pit of his stomach, and swallowed hard.

"You just left me at school! Everybody else's mamas and daddies were there, and the teacher kept asking me where you were. Everybody was gone and I was still there!" She pressed her tiny hands against her cheeks, trying to settle herself.

"Yeah, well, I don't know what you want to hear, Sophie. I got tied up at work. That bitch Amber had me doing the stupidest things. I couldn't get out." He knew that it wasn't right to talk to her like this; he was treating her like she was someone his own age, but he didn't care. She might as well learn now that the world was a rough place. He pulled to a stop at a red light, and she glared daggers at him.

"I hate you! Do you hear me? I hate you! You're a horrible, mean Daddy, and you don't care about anybody but you! You teach me bad words, and then I say them, and then I get in trouble for them! You don't read books to me, or play with me! You're so much more meaner than Mama was! I hate you; I wish you weren't my Daddy!" She was

screaming furiously now, her chest heaving with the rage that coursed through her. Her hands were shaking, and he felt his temper bubbling over.

"Yeah? You hate me?" He looked toward her angrily, and she nodded, tears spilling onto her soft cheeks. He laughed softly. "You know, that's a funny thing, 'cause guess what? I hate you, too. You ruined my life. Your mama was right about you; you are disgusting."

She looked towards him, her mouth dropping open in disbelief. As soon as he had said the words, he knew he shouldn't have. All the same, they had slipped out, no matter how angry he had been in the moment, and they hung in the air. Suddenly, and without warning, she had pushed the car door open and had jumped out, her tiny legs carrying her as fast and as hard as she could go through the stopped traffic and through a parking lot. He cursed loudly, beeping his horn at her as he watched her run. He yelled out to her, but she wouldn't stop; or maybe she just couldn't. Maybe the words that echoed in her ears wouldn't let her stop, wouldn't give her a moment to breathe.

When the light turned green, he swerved in front of the other lanes of traffic, pulling the car into the parking lot she had disappeared into. He panicked for a moment, and then saw her bright green dress turn the corner behind the building, and he pulled as close as he could before leaping out of the car and following her. He didn't know what he would say or do when he saw her, but he bit his tongue as he found her, huddled behind a bush at the back of the parking lot, her tiny knees curled up to her chest as she sobbed in the dense shrubbery.

He rushed over to her, trying to get his mouth to apologize for all the things he had said. No matter how much he thought any of those things, he never should have said any of them to her. Whether or not he loved her, she was his, and she was here, and he couldn't change it.

She saw him approaching and let out a blood curdling scream, swatting at the air around her like she was being attacked.

"Get away from me! I hate you! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! I want you to die!" She was hysterical now, crying like he had threatened to kill her. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat, but couldn't. Instead, he knelt down and scooped her into his arms. She kicked, and screamed, and instead of yelling back at her, or trying to hurt her, he held her. His strong arms wrapped around her tiny body, holding her close to his chest, and she stopped fighting. She sobbed against him, her body heaving so much that he held her tighter, pushing a hand hard against the back of her head so that she could cry into the nape of his neck. They stood like that for what seemed like hours, her crying, and him holding her close, cradling her like a baby. He felt his heart breaking as she wept against him, her tears seeping into his suit. This time, he didn't try to push away the guilt that he felt for causing her such misery.

He didn't think he'd be able to anyway, even if he had wanted to.

"I'm sorry," his words were soft, but he brushed his lips against her tiny ear as he held her. By the time he said the words, her howls had quieted into soft, pitiful sobs that made him feel ill. Her body was

limp in his arms, and he stroked her dark hair with his thick fingers, rocking her back and forth like the baby he assumed she had never really had a chance to be.

9. Need

There had been a placid understanding between them since that day in the parking lot over two weeks ago. Without even speaking the words, they had promised each other so much that day. And though the ache of his words had stayed in her eyes for days after the incident, she had bluntly told him that she forgave him, and he found it incredibly mature of the five-year-old.

In a few days, she went back to being the spirited child that he had come to appreciate her as. He kept her enrolled in the daycare because it was the only real form of contact she had with the outside world, unless she was at his studio, and it was still too risky to let her run around there. However, he made sure that he had been exactly on time, if not a few minutes early, every day since the incident. It didn't go unnoticed by Sophie, and she grinned brightly at him each time she saw him walk into the building to take her home. He had been so busy, in fact, between dealing with Amber at work and dealing with Sophie at home that he barely had time to even think about how to keep searching for Brenda, much less actually do it.

After weeks of nagging back pain, he finally decided he had to reclaim his bed. Since Sophie couldn't sleep on the lumpy couch, he bought her a small mattress and let Maybelle help her pick out some pink, flowery sheets to put on it. He had finally taken the time to clean out a smaller room in the back of his house, and had placed her bed in there. She slept in it most of the time, but on certain nights, like if it was storming, she would appear at the foot of his bed, and ask to lie next to him. He always let her of course, and though he wanted to reach out and hold her while she trembled as the thunder rumbled through the room, something inside of him wouldn't let him.

One Saturday afternoon, Corny and Sophie were at home when the doorbell rang. Sophie jumped up from her coloring book on the floor and raced to the source of the noise, stopping dead in her tracks when she pulled the door open and recognized the woman standing just outside.

"What do you want, mean lady?" She didn't even pretend to be nice to her, or try to remember her name. Take _that_.

Amber narrowed her eyes at the child, her mouth falling open in disgust.

"You insufferable little monster," she spat the words at her, and grabbed hold of Sophie's wrist. She flinched in the woman's cool grasp, and let a soft whine slip out from between her lips.

"What the hell?" Corny's voice was rough as he came up behind Sophie. "Don't you dare touch her." Without hesitance, he pulled Sophie's arm from Amber's grasp and pushed the child into the house behind him, stepping onto the porch to join his boss. He crossed his arms over his chest, studying her intensely. "What are you doing here, Amber?"

This is my house, you have no right to come over here and manhandle her." Or him, for that matter.

She pressed her pink lips together tightly, her fingers resting on her hips.

"I need you to come into the station."

He furrowed his brows at her.

"What are you a cop? Anyway, it's Saturday. You don't own me today, remember?"

She looked distraught at his words, and it gave him a sick sense of accomplishment. He kept his arms folded, and looked at her. She sighed loudly.

"Damnit, Corny! I need you!" She stomped her foot, and he couldn't stop the smile that pressed across his face at her words and actions. He rocked back on his heels, glaring at her and wearing a smirk that seemed to infuriate her.

"What was that?" His voice rose slightly as he tried to suppress the laughter he felt inside bubbling inside of him.

She scrunched her face up, and let one manicured nail brush a stray blonde hair from her face.

"You need to come down to the studio. The Miss Teenage Hairspray pageant is next Saturday, and I just got word from the station executive that he wants us to rework the opening sequence." She bit her bottom lip, watching him with her bright eyes. Shit. He had forgotten that was next Saturday.

"I need, we need." He glanced up at her, "I want you to say what you said the first time."

She shot him a confused look, and he smirked.

"What are you talking about?" She was getting flustered now, and he found it amusing to watch the color burn into her cheeks.

"I want you to say what you said the first time," he repeated his words slowly, enjoying the awkwardness of the moment. "You needâ€|"

She glared up at him, anger suddenly flashing in her eyes again. She clenched her jaw, and looked away from him.

"I need you," she mumbled the words under her breath, and crossed her arms tightly over her chest. He watched her, blinking.

"What was that? I couldn't quite hear you." He wasn't exactly sure why he was enjoying seeing her squirm. Maybe it was because she was his boss. Maybe it was because she was finally admitting that she couldn't run the Corny Collins show without the cooperation of Corny Collins. Or maybe it was because, somewhere deep inside of her, he knew that she enjoyed being knocked down from her self-claimed title of Goddess and into the shoes of a regular person; one who actually depended on others.

"I said I _need you_!" She screamed the words at him now, and Sophie pushed her out of the house and in front of Corny, pointing a finger directly at Amber.

"Don't you yell at my daddy, you nasty lady!" Her small face was red and Amber looked down at her, shocked at the fact that she was being berated by a five-year-old.

Corny placed his large hands on her shoulders, pulling her back and towards him.

"It's okay, Sophie. I was just enjoying watching Amber squirm." He tapped his fingers on her tiny shoulders, and she lifted her head to look up at him, smiling devilishly.

"Squirm like a slimy snake!" The thought amused her and she laughed loudly, and Amber narrowed her eyes at the child.

Corny nodded at his daughter.

"Exactly like a snake, honey."

Amber fell back on her heels, glaring at the two of them as they shared a small laugh.

"You know, as much as I'm enjoying this touching bond you two have recently forged, we really need to get going." She glanced at her watch. "We have a lot to do, and not much time to do it in."

Nearly two hours later, they had been at the studio for what seemed like years, going over and over the new routines. Because Amber had insisted that because only Corny's parts had been affected by the sudden change in plans, he was the only one who had been forced to spend his Saturday afternoon at work.

"No, damnit Corny, you're not doing it right!" She said it for what felt like the thousandth time, and he sighed loudly, glancing at Sophie who was sitting just off the studio set, hands folded neatly in her lap. Amber stamped her heel on the floor, and Sophie jumped, her eyes glossing over from waiting for so long.

"Fine," he crossed his arms, "then you show me what to do."

She glared at him, chewing on the inside of her lip before allowing herself to join him on set. Her heels clicked loudly as she came closer to him. She did a few quick steps, to illustrate her point, and he watched her. Suddenly, she was no different than the girl he'd spent every day with for four years. She was still the girl who had pulled her skirts up at the pageant in 1962, the one who had stomped her feet and pouted when Inez had been crowned. Her body still moved the way it had then, and that wasn't necessarily a good thing. She looked clumsy and awkward as she danced, and he tried to suppress the smile that pushed across his lips.

She looked up as she finished, and saw the amused look on his face.

"What's so funny?" She was slightly out of breath; her cheeks flushed pink with exertion. He started to speak, and his eyes fell upon

Sophie, who was now standing hopefully on the sidelines of the stage, posed in the position Amber had just completed. He felt himself smiling, and Amber turned quickly to follow his eyes. Sophie caught them looking at her and retreated quickly into a regular standing position. Amber turned back to Corny, her eyes slightly less hateful than they had been just moments ago.

"So what's so funny?" She asked the question again, and he focused his attention on her.

"Nothing," he shook his head, "It's just nice to see that not much has changed."

She glared at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Her hands were back at her hips, her neck was pushed out so far that she reminded him of a chicken, and he smirked.

"I justâ€¦you never had the most rhythm in the world, Amber."

From the look on her face, he might as well have called her a beast. She grew outraged quickly.

"You son of a-" she stopped herself, and brought her face close to his, "You're lucky I haven't reported your ass to the cops for sleeping with a sixteen-year-old girl." Her blue eyes were full of hate. "You're lucky you still have a job after you run out of here early every day to pick her up. This could be a lot worse than I'm making it. My mother would have already strung you up by your toenails."

He knew her words were true, but wasn't about to admit it to her. She pushed herself close to him, her lip curling in disgust.

"You better watch your attitude. Don't think I couldn't find someone with a mega-watt smile just as soon as I kicked your ass to the curb." He smirked at her words; he vaguely remembered saying something similar to her once, when she'd been on the show.

He could feel the anger building inside of him, and almost raised his voice to her. It would have been so easy, and he wanted to, with the disgusting look she was giving him, but he caught Sophie's figure in the corner of his vision and lowered his voice.

"Don't take your frustration out on me, Amber. It's not my fault you haven't been laid since your brief affair with the council boys." Her face contorted slowly into a look of shock and disbelief, but he wasn't quite finished. "You just need to give me a chance to show you what I'm really talented at." And he winked at her. He wasn't completely sure why, and he was almost frightened that she'd try to sue him for some type of sexual harassment, but the look on her face made it all worth it. It wasn't that he necessarily found himself attracted to her, but there was something delicious about the way she carried herself; the way she saw herself as an indestructible force to be reckoned with. He suddenly wanted to change that perception she had of herself.

She huffed loudly and stormed away, her heels clicking loudly on the floor as she disappeared into the backstage area. Sophie rushed out

quickly as she left, dancing excitedly towards him.

"I want to dance just like her!" She held her hands up and twirled around, grinning up at him from where she stood. She hesitated a moment. "But I don't like the way she talks to you."

He shrugged, smiling down at her.

"It doesn't bother me. She's just angry because she hasn't had anyone to, uh, _dance_ with for quite some time now."

Sophie nodded seriously up at him, and stroked her chin with an index finger.

"But remember what you said to me, Daddy? You said to never let anybody make you feel bad about yourself." She frowned up at him. "Does she make you feel bad, Daddy?"

He held his breath as he looked at her. Amber made him feel a lot of things, but _bad_ wasn't one of them.

10. Sick

Something was _not_ right. He wasn't sure if it was something he'd eaten yesterday, or some kind of bug, but his normal morning routine didn't usually consist of leaning over the toilet every twenty minutes and flushing away the remainder of what he had to eat the day before. He felt his face flush red hot, and put the toilet lid down, letting his cheek rest against it, his knees holding him up on the cold tile floor.

He heard the bathroom door creek open and Sophie stood in her nightgown looking at him, her face creased with worry.

"Are you okay, Daddy?" Her hand still rested on the knob, and he tried to offer her a weak smile.

"I'm fine; you can go on back to bed." She hesitated at the door, and when he felt himself beginning to retch again, he heard her whimper softly.

"Daddy, you're sick." She was beside him quickly and holding a moist cloth, which she promptly held against his face. "Come on; let's get you back to bed."

She pulled the covers around him, and though his temperature was soaring, cold chills were pulsing through him, and he pulled them closer to him. She climbed into bed next to him, her tiny fingers stroking his hair as slants of the morning sun spilled onto the bed around them, and though his stomach was still churning, he couldn't help but smile into his pillow. There was something about having someone to take care of you, someone to sit next to you in the light of early morning that made him feel good.

"I'm sorry you don't feel good, Daddy. Let me just take care of you. Let me make you all better, okay?" Her small hands stroked his face, her body curled next to his.

"Okay," he let the word slip past his lips, and she crooned again,

laying her head on his pillow with him, her body pressed against his.

"Do you want me to call Miss Maybelle and tell her you won't be able to make it into work today?" She sounded so grown up that he forgot she was a child, and, in turn, had forgotten all about work. He groaned as he felt his stomach stir, and Sophie's fingers brushed his forehead, shushing him. "You've got a fever, Daddy, you can't go to work."

He wanted to protest, and almost did, but he felt the bile rising in his throat again and barely made it to the toilet before it left his mouth. He let himself stay there for a moment, and listened as Sophie shuffled through the house and to the telephone. He heard her working the rotary, and then speaking into the receiver.

"Hi, Miss Maybelle? This is Sophie." He heard her pause. "Oh, no, I'm fine, but it's my daddy. He's sick, and he's not going to be able to come into work today. Do you think you can do the show without him?"

He listened as she made her way back to the bathroom, hiding his face in the crook of his arm, and keeping his smile to himself.

"I wish Tom and Jerry was on," Sophie pushed her back against the headboard of his bed, her tiny feet crossed over each other as she sat next to her father. "I love Tom and Jerry; they're so, so funny. Do you like them, Daddy?" She glanced over at Corny, who nodded slightly. He had never watched an episode of Tom and Jerry in his life, but saying he had was easier than not.

She sighed happily and crossed her arms behind her head, resting against the headboard as a commercial played on the television. His show had gone off just shortly before, and they had been in bed since early this morning, watching television and chatting casually whenever a topic for conversation popped into her head.

So far today, she'd made him toast and orange juice for breakfast and crackers for lunch. She'd attempted to make him soup, and it seemed that she had no qualms about using the stove; he assumed Brenda had never taught her that third degree burns hurt. He'd put a stop to that quickly; anyway, the thought of not eating warm food didn't exactly break his heart at the moment.

"Do you want anything, Daddy? Do you want some more juice, or water?" She was looking at him worriedly again, even though he hadn't gotten sick for a few hours. She curled her feet up under her and sat up straight. "Do you need me to get you a new washcloth for your face? I bet that one's warm by now."

Before he could protest, she was down the hall, moistening a new cloth for him. She carried it back to him dutifully, laying it across his forehead with her gentle touch. She regained her place in the bed next to him, and he turned to her suddenly, and she looked at him.

"How did you get to be such a good nurse?" His soft smile didn't go unnoticed by her, and she shrugged.

"I don't know, I just like taking care of you." She smiled at him,

and the honesty in her voice broke his heart.

He felt a lump rising in his throat, but quickly recognized that it wasn't from his illness. He suddenly wanted to know everything about her; everything that she'd been trying to tell him, and that he hadn't been listening to. It wasn't enough just to know that she was his biological daughter, or that she liked Tom and Jerry. He needed to know everything.

"Do you think you'll be all better for the Miss Hairspray show next week?" Her voice was serious, and she studied him intensely. He suddenly felt guilty for making everything, even her thoughts, about his work. He nodded.

"I'm sure I'll be fine by then. You're doing a good job of making me all better."

Her face lit up, and she grinned brightly at him, and then reclined on her hands again, a small, satisfied smile on her face.

"Hey, Daddy?" Her voice sounded small, and he turned his head to look at her. She was quiet for a moment. "Do you think I'm ugly?"

Her question shocked him, and it looked like she had been preparing herself to ask this question for some time now. She smiled weakly up at him as he studied her dark features, the tiny nose in the center of her face, the small pink lips that had smiled through so many tough times. Even though Corny didn't see many children, he was quite sure that Sophie was one of the prettier ones.

"Of course I don't. Why would you ever think that?" He hoped she wasn't still thinking about the things he'd said to her in the car weeks ago. He'd apologized for them, and he'd made sure never to speak to her that way again.

Her small shoulders shrugged.

"I don't know," she looked wearily up at him, "Mama called me ugly a lot, and it made me sad. She said I was ugly 'cause I looked like you, and I didn't think that was very nice, because I can't help what I look like." She paused for a moment, collecting her breath, and glanced sheepishly up at him. "Anyway, I don't think you are ugly. I think you are a very handsome daddy."

He felt himself blush at her words, and she watched him for a moment.

"Thank you, Sophie. I think you're a very pretty little girl." Even now, his mouth wouldn't wrap around any possessive words. He couldn't bring himself to say my little girl.

She went back to watching the television, and he cleared his throat.

"Sophie," she looked back up at him, "Tell me what it was like when you lived with your mama." She pulled herself into a sitting position and her brows furrowed in concentration. "What types of things did you do together?"

She thought for a long moment, deep in concentration.

"Ummâ€¦" she was quiet for a long time, and he decided to help her out.

"Did she ever take you to the zoo?" Sophie seemed to like animals; she was always pointing out the animals she saw as they drove in the car, and always making pictures of them on scrap paper.

"No," she answered him easily, shaking her head, and looking to him for more.

"What about the park? Did you go to the park very much?" The park was free and easy; Brenda must have been able to relate to it.

"No," that was an easy question, too. "Mama never took me anywhere. We just stayed home a lot."

"Did you have a lot of toys at your house?" If she had, Brenda hadn't sent any with her. Since she'd arrived, Maybelle had given her a few of Inez's old stuffed animals, including a penguin which she had named Bob and carried with her religiously. Other than that, he hadn't bought her any kind of toy, either.

"No," she was beginning to sound like a broken record, "Mama said toys made the house look dumb."

"Well, what did you do for fun?" He hoped Brenda had at least spent time with her, whether or not she spoiled her, which was apparently a not.

"I colored a lot, and drew pictures." She was silent for a moment, and then lowered her voice, turning to him. "And Mama didn't know it, but sometimes when she was gone, I turned the TV on and watched your show. And I danced." She said the last words gleefully, as if they were a delicious secret.

He felt himself smiling at her.

"Who came to play with you when your mama was gone?"

She looked at him strangely.

"Nobody, Daddy. Mama said she was teaching me to take care of myself, and that made her happy." She nodded in affirmation, and he bit on his lip.

"She just left you alone?" What kind of ignorant person would leave a five-year-old child alone in a house? Well, apparently Brenda, that's what. He wanted to ask more, but Sophie smiled up at him, and he suddenly realized he couldn't get angry right now. He had to watch himself around her, no matter how idiotic Brenda was.

"Okay, one more question." His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he bit on his bottom lip. "Who do you like living with more; me, or your mama?" He wasn't exactly sure why he suddenly wanted to know so badly, but he did.

She scrunched her face up. Apparently it was a harder question than the ones he'd just asked. She smiled easily at him.

"Well, you're nicer to me than Mama was," she admitted slowly, "and when you yell at me, you say sorry, and Mama didn't. She hit me a lot harder, too."

"She hit you?" He couldn't help his outburst, and Sophie glanced up at him fearfully.

"When I was a bad girl," her eyes were suddenly wide, "but, Daddy, I haven't been a bad girl! I haven't been bad today!"

His heart broke at her words, and he wanted to hold her, but he couldn't. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat, and failed.

"I would never hit you," he told her softly, his fingers wanting so bad to reach out and touch her, stroke her soft, dark hair. Instead, he balled his hands into a fist on his lap. "You never deserve to be hit."

They were both quiet for a moment, and Sophie looked back at him, the fear gone from her eyes.

"I'll tell you something, but you have to promise to keep it a secret." Her eyes were wide, and serious. He nodded.

"Okay."

"No, really, Daddy, promise. You can't tell anybody, especially not Mama 'cause I don't want her feelings to be hurt." She moved toward him, and in a second she was on his lap, facing him.

"I promise." Something about his eyes told her that he was serious, and she placed her hands on either side of his face gently, so that he would focus on her face.

"I love Mama," she said the words as if she needed to explain it to him, "but, I love you a little bit more."

And though he couldn't bring himself to say the words back to her, he already knew that his defenses had begun to falter. He tried to ignore the innocence in her eyes, but failed, and let his arms wrap around her, holding her small body against his, in the first and only real hug he'd given her since she'd come into his life.

11. Bond

****Hey everyone! This is kind of a two-part chapter, but it was getting a little long so the next chapter will continue where this leaves off. Enjoy!****

* * *

>He tried to ignore another one of the council girl's cold glares as he twisted, the kids scattering around him routinely. There was something off about today; the girls weren't smiling at him, weren't giggling when he walked past. Everyone was, in fact, eerily cold and stony-faced. He tried to disregard the way most of them stayed just a *few* inches too far from him while they danced, but when the show went to commercial break, everyone watched him wearily, as if he'd been threatening to kill them if they missed a step.

He tried to make casual conversation with the girls while the make-up women rushed around them, and Corny singled out the only one of the girls who hadn't been looking at him like he had two heads.

"Inez, come here." He wagged his fingers at her and she was beside him in a moment, watching him with the large, dark eyes that made her sweet face so kind. "What's everyone's problem? They've been looking at me strange all day." Inez sighed, pushing him behind a wall so that they might have some privacy from the rest of the council kids.

"Listen, I don't know how, but some of them might know about Sophie." His eyes went wide, and she shook her head. "I didn't tell them! I swear! Mama would tan my hide if I had." Of course she had known about Sophie for some time, but he had known Inez since she was a small child, and he knew better than to think she'd betray his confidence. "I heard some of them talking backstage," her voice was low, "I think Miss Von Tussle- I mean Amber," she spit her name, "might have told them."

He felt his face flush, and wanted to confront her at that exact moment, but knew he couldn't. They were in the middle of a show. He glanced around the backstage area before the camera man called them back to set, but couldn't find her. He'd have to approach her about it later, and he definitely would. As for right now, he needed to finish the damn show without one of the girls worrying that he'd impregnate her by looking in her general direction.

Amber pushed the door of Corny's dressing room open, peeking her head inside and sneering when she saw Sophie sitting on the couch, holding a piece of paper in her hands and studying it intensely.

"Oh, you," Sophie looked up at her as she said the words, and crinkled her nose at her. "What are you doing here? I thought you were at some kind of babysitter's."

"I'm not a baby," Sophie shot back quickly, "and I couldn't go to school today because there's a holiday. Mem- memory!"

"Memorial Day?" Amber offered dryly, and Sophie nodded.

"Yes, that. School was not open today, so that's why I'm here." She went back to studying the picture in her hands, and Amber turned to leave. "You look like a little girl in this picture!" Sophie's words stopped her and she turned as the child held the black and white photo out for her to see. Amber pushed the door open with the toe of her shoe and walked closer to her, snatching the picture out of Sophie's hand.

"Hey!" The child cried indignantly, trying to get it back. "That's mine!"

"Calm down, you little demon, I'm just looking at it." Amber swallowed hard at her words. She'd heard that same name directed at her so, so many times growing up that it felt strange saying them. She'd always gotten the blunt force of her mother's anger, and had always felt personally responsible for every bad mood her mother had been in. Of course, she began to realize when she was a teenager that wasn't always the case, but for the first half of her life, she'd

cried herself to sleep at night thinking about it.

"What did you say?" Sophie withdrew quickly, her eyes large and dark.

"I said I'm just looking at it," she felt her heart pounding in her chest, and suddenly regretted the name-calling. If she told Corny about that, he'd have her ass, and not in a good way.

"No!" She kept her eyes on Amber, "You called me a demon!"

Shit. She started to open her mouth, to apologize, or simply demand that the child not tell her father about it, but Sophie stopped her with her words.

"That's what my Mama always called me, 'cause she said demons-"

"Destroy everything." She wasn't exactly how the words had slipped from her mouth without even noticing them, but they had, and Sophie was looking at her in confusion. Amber studied her for a moment, biting on her lip to keep the tears from stinging her eyes at the harsh memory of Velma. She turned her attention back to the picture in her hands, and Sophie quieted, watching as she examined it.

Amber recognized it quickly; it was a cast photo of the Corny Collins show, with the inscription _1962_ in the lower left hand corner. She studied all of the familiar faces; girls who had been her friends, whom she hadn't had contact with for years, boys that she'd had slight crushes on that she'd never told them about. It had only been five years since this picture was taken, and it seemed like an eternity ago. She looked at the smiling faces of the boys and girls in the picture, because that was all they had really been at the time. Amber had felt like the queen of the universe for those three years before Inez took the role of Miss Teenage Hairspray, and really, what was that? She had been seventeen years old, and hadn't even thought about the rest of her life.

Finally, her eyes fell across the picture of her as a teenager, smiling on the outside but dying on the inside. Dying because she'd hated that dress, and those shoes that her mother had insisted she wear. Dying because she was forced to live a lie, just to please someone else. She couldn't help but hate herself at that moment, and suddenly needed to sit. She seated herself on the couch, and Sophie moved toward her cautiously, looking over her shoulder and at the picture.

"There's my mama," she said the words slowly, pointing her small finger out to point at Brenda's picture, "I think I was in her belly then, and she maybe didn't even know it."

Amber felt herself nodding meekly. She hadn't, in fact, known it. She remembered that day perfectly, because she and Brenda had made plans for the next week to get their nails done. She hadn't found out she was pregnant until the day before they were supposed to go.

"There's my mother," it felt strange to say the words, because she hadn't talked to Velma, much less called her _mother_ in years; since she'd turned eighteen, in fact. Sophie leaned closer to her, studying the picture of a smirking Velma, and gasped loudly.

"Oh my goodness! That's the witch!" Sophie scowled suddenly, and Amber looked at her, surprised. "My mama always used to tell me stories about a nasty witch lady, and that's her!"

Amber wasn't exactly sure how to respond to her words, so she kept her eyes focused on the picture, but felt Sophie looking at her.

"Is your mother a witch?" She looked so genuinely concerned that she couldn't help but smile.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, she is."

"Wow," Sophie fell into a hushed awe, her eyes still looking over all of the smiling faces. She pointed happily to Corny. "Look, there's my daddy!" She looked at Amber curiously. "Why are you standing right next to my daddy?"

Amber tried to fight down the blush in her cheeks.

"That's just the way they took the picture." There was no reason for her to know why Amber was really standing as close as possible to Corny. No reason to tell her that she'd had a passionate crush on her father for years, and had been devastated when she'd found out that he'd gotten Brenda pregnant. No reason to relive all of the hurt she had felt, no reason to tell her that's why she hated him so deeply now. He had broken her heart and never even known it.

The dressing room door suddenly swung open, and Corny glared at them.

"What are you doing in here?" He looked angry, and Sophie whimpered softly.

"Daddy, she's just looking at a picture with me."

He shot Sophie a sympathetic look, and glared back at Amber.

"I need to talk to you. Now."

She felt the heat rising in her face as she stood, and walked toward him like a scorned child. She lifted her head suddenly when she neared him, and glared him in the eyes.

"In the hallway." He let her walk out the door before him, and turned to his daughter. "I'll be right back, Sophie."

12. Scream

****This is a continuance of the last chapter... most of you probably know that, but just in case, you do now... LOL... anyway, enjoy! BTW, this chapter has a little more language than the other chapters, so proceed with caution. I promise I'll be good from now on.****

* * *

>She nodded as the door shut, and Corny turned on his heels quickly, but Amber had already regained control of the situation. <p>"Before you start with whatever it is you're unhappy about, I feel the need

to tell you that we've been forced to push the Miss Teenage Hairspray pageant back a few weeks because of some unavoidable circumstances." She pursed her lips at him.<p>

He blinked, letting the words settle.

"What do you mean 'unavoidable circumstances'?" He mocked her tone.

She swallowed hard, and tried not to let him see that he was intimidating her.

"I, uh, didn't get the sponsors signed on in time, so we were forced to push the event back until the week after next." She crossed her arms over her chest, withdrawing into herself. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he advanced on her quickly.

"You're kidding me, right?" His voice was angry; it was the harshest tone he'd ever used with her, even during those years she'd been on the show. She felt her eyes go wide, but shook her head slowly, backing up as he moved toward her. "You must be kidding, because no one, not even you, could be that irresponsible and careless."

She shot him a look of revulsion, and pointed her finger towards him, scorning him like she'd seen Velma do a million times.

"Don't you â-dare speak to me like-

He grabbed her finger suddenly, twisting it until she squealed loudly and brought it down to her side, holding it with her other hand. She tried to maintain the nasty look on her face, but she was suddenly afraid of him as he towered over her.

"You have no right to chastise me for something that you did wrong. You couldn't care less about this job, and you know it. That conniving bitch of a mother of yours was ten times better at this job than you'll ever be. Tell me that the only reason you came back here and took this job was not to make my life a living hell." He was speaking so fast that he barely had time to breathe, and he glared at her.

"My world doesn't revolve around you, Corny. I didn't decide to make a career out of watching you squirm."

"No, it's just one of the fringe benefits, isn't it?" He narrowed his eyes at her, "You are so negligent that you didn't even think to get the sponsors in on time for our biggest event of the year?"

She didn't know what to say to that, because, the truth was, she had neglected her responsibilities, though not necessarily on purpose. She'd been so wrapped up in the idea that she was finally in control of Corny; the idea that she could finally seek revenge on him for how he had hurt her so long ago. Though he wasn't completely right; she hadn't taken the job simply to torture him. She had liked the idea of being station manager, and had always envied the power that Velma had in this position. She'd always wanted that kind of power over people, even as a teenager. Of course, this seemed like the most natural way to assume power; to follow in the steps of mother.

"Don't talk to me about neglecting responsibilities, you ass. I am not the one who impregnated a sixteen year old girl!" She was poking her finger at him again, digging her nail into the jacket of his suit. He wanted to twist her finger off, but instead slapped it away with his hand.

"Jesus, Amber, give it a rest!" He didn't care that they were starting to attract attention, but brought his head closer to hers so that she'd be able to hear every word he said. "You just had to tell everyone, didn't you? You had to make sure that this precious little tidbit of information slipped from between those perfectly pink lips of yours, didn't you? You can't let anyone deal with their own damn business; you have to spread it around town just like you spread your legs for every man that would have you."

She reeled back quickly, letting her hand slap his left cheek so hard that it turned his face away from her. She felt her heart pounding as his sharp white teeth bit the inside of his cheek, his skin turning a soft shade of pink. He turned to her again quickly, his eyes dark with anger, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he thought about everything he'd like to do to her; kick her, spit on her. But none of that was enough, none of that was enough to really get to her, to humiliate her more than she had humiliated him. In a second, he knew exactly what to do.

He grabbed her face, and pulled it to his roughly, pressing a deep, hard kiss against her perfectly pink lips, holding her so hard against him that she couldn't even breathe. He pushed his mouth against hers, his tongue delving deeper inside of her mouth, searching the warm cavity that was still too full of shock to respond. He could hear the moan of protest starting from deep within her, and her hands were suddenly in his hair and on his face, pushing him away from her with all of the might in her slender body. Her fingers were grabbing onto his hair, pulling it as hard as she could, pushing him away from her, her fingernails scratching him in the process.

"What the fuck!" She yelled the words at him, her face burning red with outrage and mortification, "What in the hell is wrong with you? You are a sick, pathetic man!"

He found an odd satisfaction in her words, because it meant that he had, indeed, proven his point. He had shown her that she wasn't always in control; that she could be brought down from her pedestal in a moment's time. She tried to slap him again, but he grasped her wrist. She pulled away from him, screeching like an animal at the feeling of being so captive to him. He stood back with a satisfied smirk on his face, and suddenly, her eyes bulged, her fingers curled into fists at her side, and she stamped her foot furiously.

"You son of a bitch! You jackass!" He was grateful that everyone had scattered when she'd slapped him, because her words echoed through the empty halls. He couldn't help it, but at that moment, the only worry in his mind was that Sophie would hear the words, and use them at a later date in time. He'd worked so hard on eliminating curse words from her vocabulary, and she hadn't said any for a few weeks.

"That is it!" Her voice was breaking now, and she was trembling just slightly. "That's it!" she said the words again, but softer this

time. She stepped towards him, her hands shaking as she raised them again, pointing her finger for the final time at him. "You hate me so much? You think I'm such a horrible, awful, ugly person?"

He didn't respond, but watched her, his arms crossed over his chest. He tried to keep the smirk on his face, but felt his lips beginning to curl into a frown.

"You don't want to work for me?" She took a moment, her voice dropping as she looked into his deep, blue eyes. "You got it, you bastard. You just got your ass fired."

Her feet carried her away quickly, the heels of her shoes clicking as she went.

He stood motionless for a moment, letting her words sink in, and when he could feel his body again, he walked to the dressing room door, and pushed it open. Sophie stood inside, watching him with large, scared eyes. It was obvious that she'd heard their conversation. Without a word, she scurried to get her things, and came to stand before him.

"Are we going home now?" Her voice was quiet, and she clutched the picture tightly in her tiny hands.

He watched her for a moment, with her large, dark eyes, and her tiny, sweet face. She was so much a victim of the life that had been chosen for her, and he suddenly wanted to give her the childhood she had been passed over for. He decided not to let himself think about the fact that he'd just kissed Amber, or that he'd just been fired. Instead, he let himself focus on her; the one thing that he did have at the moment.

"I was thinking we could go to the park."

13. Beginning

****Hi everyone! There's not much action in this chapter, just a general summary. I just wanted to let everyone know that this story will only have like three more chapters... so please enjoy what's left! I promise the next three chapters will be REALLY good!!****

*** * ***

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It had been a week since he'd been fired, and he hadn't been back to the studio since the day Amber had muttered those words and then stormed off, her dress billowing behind her as she went.

He'd tried not to put much thought into the fact that he was unemployed, and had, in fact, kept Sophie out of school every day during the week because, well, he wanted someone to spend time with. It got awfully boring sitting at home; waiting for a five-year-old to get out of daycare, and the only way to remedy that was not to send her to daycare. They'd gone to the park, and on picnics. He'd been

promising to take her to the zoo, and they decided on the following Saturday, on the exact day that the Miss Teenage Hairspray pageant had been originally scheduled for.

Sophie had begged him to watch the show the entire week, but he refused. He didn't want to see who Amber had hired to take his place, because, somewhere, deep inside of him, he knew that whoever it was might be better than Corny was. He might be younger, spunkier, have better hair and a better smile than even he did. He did wonder what the show had changed its name to, perhaps The Show Formerly Known as the Corny Collins Show. He could just imagine the new host yelling it charismatically, and the council members bobbing around behind him just like they always had; that's what they were supposed to do. He knew they were wondering where he went; he hadn't gotten a chance to say goodbye to any of them, and they probably assumed he'd just had enough of Amber and quit. But he never would have. That show was his life; those kids were his students, and Amber—well, she was something to him, too.

He'd tried to go over it in his head while he slept at night; the reaction she'd had to his powerful kiss. She had reacted with disgust, and anger, and that's exactly what he had expected of her. However, that didn't mean that it didn't bother him, just the tiniest bit. He had thought about doing it for some time, and that was just the perfect opportunity. She had been so frustrated; her chest rising and falling with each breath, her cheeks flushed pink. It was so incredibly arousing to him that he couldn't stand it any longer; he had to have her at that moment. And though it had been short and rather painful for him, she'd tasted exactly like he'd always expected she'd taste. She was a mixture of vanilla and lavender, her mouth was warm and inviting. Her flavor had been delicious, and he couldn't help but want another taste of her, now more than ever.

Of course, Sophie had picked now to start to like Amber. She had suddenly begun referring to her by her actual name, and not that nasty lady or that mean witch. And though she'd heard their conversation just outside the dressing room door, she had no idea what fired meant, or why Amber had stormed away without saying goodbye. When Corny had explained to her that he'd lost his job, she had been disappointed, but when he told her that it meant they had more time to be together, she was thrilled. She began to make furious plans, for swimming, and bike riding, playing outside and going shopping. They had only made it as far as the park a few times, but it had enthralled Sophie.

She'd brushed her fingertips lightly over the plastic seats of the swings, taken in the sight of the slide that loomed above her head. Instead of rushing in and playing like any other child, she'd taken time to savor this moment. It was, after all, the first time she'd ever been to a park. They'd stayed there for hours; until the sun was low on the horizon and casting shadows across the ground. And when it had been time to go home, she'd reached up for his hand, smiling gratefully up at him, and a simple "thank you, Daddy" was all she could manage. He nodded. That was all he really wanted to hear.

That week, it took everything Corny had not to fall completely, head over heels, in love with Sophie. She'd introduced him to a world he had never known, had told him magical stories about kings and queens that lived in high towers, fairytales that she'd never experienced. Stories about mothers that loved their children and even some that

didn't. She told him more about Brenda, and what her life had been like before she'd gotten shoved out of the car and onto his porch.

She'd told him how Brenda had never hugged, or kissed her. She'd been gone a lot, but Sophie had never known where. She wasn't there to keep her safe and warm on stormy nights, had never been there to hold her close when she trembled. In short, Sophie had never had a mother. Not one like Corny's, however, who had been a single mother herself, but had raised him the way a child should be raised. He had told her about his own mother, and how much he had loved her before she'd passed away right after he'd graduated high school. Sophie had listened intently, nodding her head at all the right times and making comments that he would only expect from someone much, much older. She did, however, have more life experience than some people he knew that were in their thirties. Because of this, she made judgments when she felt they were necessary, and he always accepted her opinion as one that was just as important as his own.

The conversation she'd had with Amber in his dressing room had intrigued Sophie, and she spent much of her time asking questions about Amber, and requesting an answer from Corny. Though he didn't want to think of her so much, he would answer all of her questions as best he could.

No, Amber's mother wasn't very nice. Yes, sometimes Amber got into fights with the other council girls. No, Amber never lied to me when she was on the show. The last one, of course, wasn't completely truthful, but the way Sophie talked about Amber excitedly made him worry that she'd start to base life decisions on her, and he wasn't necessarily eager for that to happen.

It wasn't exactly that Corny had stopped searching for Brenda; it was just that he had let that priority drop behind a few other things like getting a job and providing for Sophie. He was still intrigued to find her, because he still wanted to know exactly what she was thinking when she had kicked Sophie onto his doorstep, when she hadn't seen him in five years. He could have been an alcoholic, even a drug addict by now. But apparently that didn't matter to Brenda. She just wanted her life back, didn't care what happened to their daughter.

Suddenly, that's what she was. He hadn't said it to anyone, of course, but in his mind, Sophie was his. He had to catch himself when he spoke about her, and would often end up saying something like "Myâ€¦Sophie" in the midst of a conversation.

Maybelle and Inez had dropped by several times during the past week, and Sophie loved it. She would speak excitedly to them, and beg them to tell her about what the show was like now, but Corny wouldn't allow it. He would hush her quietly, and Maybelle would shoot her a secret, sympathetic smile that Sophie found comforting. She loved having Maybelle and Inez around, because they were the only stable female figures in her life at the moment, though she began to ask for Amber a little more each day. Something about her had won Sophie over, and the fact that they shared a common bond between negligent mothers made them friends, of a sort, at least in the child's eyes.

Sophie and Corny began to establish rituals, including one where he

tucked her in at night, after reading her a story. He couldn't help letting himself begin to love her, because she was so desperately in need of it. He imagined that Amber had been similar to her at this age, desperate and hungry for any kind of attention. He wanted to make sure that she was getting the attention from the right place, so that she wouldn't grow up and feel the need to walk in her mother's shoes.

And though he was beginning to wonder if her living with him was a temporary or permanent thing, he was beginning to worry that if Brenda ever did come back for Sophie, he would be too devastated to let her go.

14. Please

Ooh! It's getting good now! D

* * *

>"Can I bring Bob, Daddy?" Sophie looked up at him, holding the stuffed penguin under her arm and watching him expectantly. She had sunglasses perched on top of her head, and a tiny bag in her other hand, to carry all of the "necessities" that she thought she might need at the zoo. Of course, these necessities consisted of finger paint, a small notebook, and a banana. As if she were afraid she would starve to death on the fifteen minute drive there.<p><p>

"Yes, you can bring Bob." He smiled down at her and she yipped happily, her tiny feet carrying her back to her room to shove more into the tiny backpack. He called out to her, warning her that he was leaving in ten minutes, and she answered him excitedly, reminding him that he couldn't leave without her. He smiled at her words, and tried to push the thought of his unemployment out of his head. He hadn't gotten any closer to getting a job since he'd been fired, but he couldn't think about that today. Today was about Sophie; she'd been looking so forward to their zoo trip for weeks, and he had made her a million promises that he felt compelled to keep; spending the day with his mind a million different places just wouldn't be right to her.

He studied the handwritten directions again, trying to memorize them before they started out in the car. He had never been to the zoo in his life, and he didn't want to spend the day driving in circles while Sophie sat beside him sulking. He read them to himself, and then tucked the paper into his pocket, just in case he got lost on the way there. He had never been good with directions, which was probably why he hadn't gone on vacation for close to ten years now. He could hear Sophie humming loudly in her room, and felt the smile press across his lips as he opened his mouth to call out for her to begin getting ready to leave, when the doorbell rang. He looked up from where he stood, and let his legs carry him to the front door, pulling it open and looking expectantly at the woman on the other side.

"Amber," he said her name bitterly, "what are you doing here?"

She paused for a moment, looking sheepishly up at him, her cheeks pink with humility.

"Hi, Corny. May I come in?" Her voice was low, and she seemed quieter than the last time he'd seen her. He crossed his arms over his chest and stayed put, watching her.

"Amber, I-"

"Amber!" He heard the squeal behind him as Sophie rushed towards them, almost knocking Corny down to wrap her skinny arms around Amber's thin waist. "You came back! I knew you would come back!" She grinned up at her, and Amber stood still, finally smiling down at her weakly.

Corny cleared his throat, causing Sophie to look up at him.

"Sophie, room. Now." He gave her a serious look, and she stomped her foot.

"But Daddy I wanna see Amber!" She glanced toward the woman for help, but Amber averted her eyes from the situation, and Corny raised his eyebrows at his daughter.

"Sophie, I said room."

She grumbled as she turned and sulked into the house.

"Are we still at least going to the zoo?" She yelled the words back at him.

"Yes, we're going to the zoo. But I want to give Amber a chance to beg before we do." He turned to smirk at the young blonde.
"Proceed."

She pursed her lips at him in an attempt to control herself from calling him a vulgar name, and blinked up at him.

"May I at least come in, please?" He hadn't heard her use such polite terms sinceâ€¦ever. He couldn't help but wonder exactly what she was doing here. He finally stepped aside, allowing her to enter, and followed her as she made her way past the hallway and into the empty space of the living room. He stood silently watching her as she shifted on her feet. She glared up at him angrily. "You're not making this any easier for me, you know."

He smiled at her.

"Oh believe me, I know. I'm not trying to make it easier for you. It's not my _job_ anymore to try and make things easier for you, remember?" He pulled his arms tight across his chest, and she glared past him, trying to summon the courage to say what she had come here to say.

"Look," she spit the word, "I don't know what to tell you. I was irrational, and irresponsible." She chewed on her lip, and lowered her gaze, and her voice. "The ratings have been lower this entire week than they've been since the show began."

He felt a smile pressing against his lips, but didn't speak. He let himself watch her, and realized that she looked just like a child when she was placed in an uncomfortable, awkward situation. He found something about that refreshing.

"I need you to come back," she said the words softly, not even bothering to look at him as she dug the toe of her shoe into the carpet. He felt himself chuckle.

"You know what I find funny, Amber? The fact that you can't even bother to apologize to someone unless you realize it's going to benefit you in some way. That's pretty cold-hearted of you, isn't it?"

She wanted to protest; to tell him that it wasn't her fault she had been raised to care only about herself, that it wasn't her fault she had always been instructed never to feel sympathy or concern for anyone but herself. But she knew he wouldn't believe that. She was old enough now to make decisions for herself, she hadn't had her mother hanging over her shoulder for years now.

"I deserve that," he might as well have smacked her in the face, just as she had done to him. She felt her face burning as she kept her eyes on the floor, hoping that he wouldn't get too much pleasure from this for too much longer. It was more humiliating than she had expected it to be.

"No, you spoiled little princess, what you deserve is a good, firm spanking."

Amber looked up at him suddenly, her cheeks flushed pink and her eyes dark. She gaped at him, and he smirked back at her. They heard a squeal from behind him, and both turned to see Sophie standing close the wall that separated the living room from the hallway.

"Daddy, no! No spanking! Amber's a big girl; you can't spank a big girl!"

"You'd be surprised," he murmured the words under his breath, and then tilted his head at Sophie. "And what did I tell you?"

She harrumphed, and stuck her hands onto her hips.

"I'm just telling you that you can't spank her!" She was defensive suddenly, and he smiled at her. "Can we go to the zoo yet?"

"Not yet, we'll leave in a few minutes. Go back to your room, please."

"But, why? I'm not the one in trouble!" She looked accusingly at Amber. "She is."

"Go back to your room, please." He said the words again, smiling kindly at her, and she groaned and disappeared again. Corny turned back to Amber, glaring at her.

"As I was saying, you deserve to be spanked like the pampered little brat that you are."

"You can't speak to me like that! I-"

"You," he began slowly, "are a guest in my house. You are no longer my boss. I can speak to you however I want to speak to you."

"I'm still a lady," she held her head up high at her words, and he exhaled loudly.

"You're a spoiled little brat," he let himself smile openly at her; "you've always gotten everything you've ever wanted and you don't know how to deal with the fact that not everyone is always willing to bow down at your feet."

She bit the inside of her cheek, trying to ignore the fact that he was right; trying to ignore the fact that he literally was asking her to beg for him.

They were silent for a moment, and he let his fingers reached out to pull gently on some of the blonde curls falling around her shoulders. She held her breath as his fingers worked through her curls.

"You know, you don't have to be so bitter. If you want to ask me on a date, just ask me." He grinned foolishly at her. She rolled her eyes, smacking his hand away from her.

"Jesus, Corny! Not everything is always about everyone being in love with you." She glowered at him. "I just came here to tell you that you can have your job back; if you want it, take it. If not, I--"

"Will continue to have the lowest ratings since the show began?" He surmised, and then hesitated, letting himself stand closer to her. The back of his hand brushed her soft cheek, and he suddenly wanted to kiss her again, more than anything. He listened as she inhaled quickly, catching her breath, and he felt the familiar tingle of arousal at the bottom of his belly. "I'll make you a deal."

She wanted to protest, or demand that he insist on his job back, but knew she couldn't. She knew he had the control in this situation, and she let herself nod, agreeing to whatever it was that he was preparing to say.

"Okay," his tone was soft, and his breath tickled her skin. Goose bumps ran up and down her arms, but she brushed them away quickly, desperate for him not to see what he was doing to her. She felt her knees beginning to tremble, and steadied herself. "I'll take the job back," he flicked a blonde ringlet over her shoulder, "if you tell me why you've always made it your personal goal to make my life a living hell."

She tried to breath, but found it hard when he was standing so close to her. She tried to think resist him, tried to pull away, but his strong fingers were so dangerously closer to her lips, threatening to stroke them softly, and she couldn't. She felt herself shudder, and finally managed to look into his eyes.

"I was in love with you, and you broke my heart," she told him honestly, her face blushing a deep crimson color. It was the most honest thing she'd ever said, to anyone, and she hated herself for it. She immediately regretted the words, but he didn't seem to notice. He laughed a deep, throaty chuckle, and smirked at her.

"Nice try, Amber, but I think we all know that Von Tussles don't have hearts to begin with," his words stung her, and she recoiled

suddenly, hating him again. She sneered at him, her lip curling as he played with her hair again, letting it fall over her shoulders as he brought his face closer to hers. Their lips were close, so incredibly close, that he could feel the spark between them. He wanted to kiss her, and this time, she wasn't resisting. She let his hand play upon the back of her neck, and let her eyes close as his lips just barely caressed hers.

She felt herself sigh, and just as he had placed his lips over hers, there was a loud banging at the front door. She tried not to, but she groaned, and he heard it. He smiled teasingly at her before slipping away from her quickly.

"We'll finish this later," he promised her, and let his feet carry him to the door. He pulled the door open quickly, still grinning like an idiot. In an instant, his smile was gone, and his mouth was as dry as cotton balls. He tried to swallow, but couldn't, and tried to breathe, but his lungs didn't seem to be working. He heard a sound escape from the back of his throat as he stared at the woman on the front porch who stood staring back at him smartly, her mouth chomping on a piece of gum that he couldn't see.

"Oh my God," he suddenly felt sick at his stomach, and felt the heat rush through his body, "What are you doing here, Brenda?"

15. Brenda

Hi everyone. This is kind of a sad chapter, at least to me. There are some things in this chapter that some people might be a little sensitive to, and I don't mean to offend anyone or hurt anyone's feelings, but it was the only thing I could really think of that made sense. So anyway, I'm kind of sad that the next chapter is the very last chapter, but also excited. I've enjoyed writing this so much, and I hope you all have enjoyed reading! Anyway, here's the chapter, and the last chapter will definitely be up within a day or two.

* * *

>"You can't take her, Brenda." The words escaped his mouth before he even had a chance to realize what he was saying. She watched him, mindlessly chewing on her gum; a trait of hers that had always driven him crazy.<p><p>

"Well," she spoke, ignoring his words, and he noticed that she sounded, and looked, exactly the same as she had all those years ago. Exactly like the last time he'd seen her, when she'd told him that she was pregnant, and he had shunned her, and had also inadvertently shunned Sophie. "I can see that nothing has changed here. You're still just as awful looking as you were five years ago."

He swallowed hard, but the lump in his throat wouldn't go away. She didn't realize it, but so much had changed. He had changed, from just a month ago when she'd dumped Sophie onto him; Sophie had changed, and she was no longer the brash five-year-old that called people slut and bitch to their faces. Amber had changed; she had become someone that realized she sometimes needed to depend on others. The only one who hadn't changed of all of them was Brenda herself.

"What are you doing here?" He asked again, crossing his arms over his chest. He realized he was still pushing the screen door open, and stepped onto the porch, leaning his back against it to block her from entering his house.

She narrowed her eyes at him, and then studied her fingernails. She was thin; maybe thinner than last time he'd seen her, and her bony shoulders protruded from the strapless dress she wore. She popped her gum, and he leaned back, pressing harder against the door in case she tried to get inside.

"Not that it's any business of yours," she rolled her eyes at him, "I just changed my mind. Now where is that little brat?"

"What?" He was sure his heart skipped a few beats, and suddenly, couldn't find his breath again. He began to feel lightheaded, and glared back at her. "You can'tâ€|you can't just change your mind, Brenda. That's now how this works. You can't just decide when you want to take care of her, and when you don't. She's not a house plant!" He could feel the blush rising in his cheeks, and she sighed loudly.

"God, jackass, don't tell me how to take care of my daughter." She sighed, and pushed herself onto her tiptoes to peer over his shoulder and through the door.

"She's not your daughter, Brenda, she's ours." You didn't seem to have any trouble remembering that when you dumped her off on me! You didn't seem to have trouble remembering that my name was on her birth certificate then!" He curled his hands into fists at his side, and tried to keep his voice level. He didn't want Sophie to hear them arguing; didn't want her to wonder out here and see her, he could only imagine what would happen then.

"You stupid son of a bitch!" She squealed the words at him, "You wanna talk about dumping? Okay, fine! Let's talk about when you dumped me because my being pregnant wasn't your damned problem. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about how my family dumped me when I gave birth to that abomination! Let's talk about how that kid drove me out of my mind for five fucking years! Let's talk about that instead!"

"Fine!" He shouted the word back, "How the hell was I supposed to know you weren't using any kind of protection? How was I supposed to know that you were that damn stupid?"

"I was stupid?" She sputtered, "I wasn't the one having sex with a sixteen year old girl! You're lucky I didn't have you arrested after you abandoned me!"

"God, Brenda, give it a rest. It's a little late for that, don't you think?" He took a moment to close his eyes, to remember that this wasn't about them. It wasn't about the fact that he was an irresponsible adult, or the fact that she didn't know how to raise a child; this was about Sophie. He knew she was speaking, but wouldn't let himself listen. He couldn't listen to her rambling, couldn't stand to be here with her, right now.

He felt his heart pounding inside of his chest, and looked toward her again. She had a finger pointed at him, shaking it violently at him

as she chastised him for God knew what. He wanted to grab her finger, just the way he had grabbed Amber's and twisted it down to her side, wanted to make her scream in pain. Wanted to hurt her so badly; more than he'd ever wanted to hurt anyone in his life.

"Just go get that that little imbecile for me, would you? I really don't feel like standing here with you all day." She chomped her gum, and he suddenly wanted to punch her.

"You can't just take her, Brenda! You can't just come in here and disrupt her life again!" His voice was louder than he'd expected it to be, and when he saw Brenda's eyes catch on something behind him, he turned, and saw Amber standing in the doorway, her eyes wide.

"Oh, my God. Brenda." Her words were barely a whisper, and she looked frightened suddenly, her eyes moving to Corny for some kind of answer. He couldn't even muster any words, and Brenda spoke up quickly, glaring up at Amber.

"What the hell are you doing here?" She screwed her mouth up, and looked mockingly at Corny. "I guess you're screwing the entire line of girls that used to be in your council? I hope he didn't give you a little mistake, too."

Amber looked stricken suddenly, her face still reflecting the sudden shock of the situation.

"What? Oh, no, I'm notâ€¦. I mean, we're not-"

"Not yet, you aren't." She rolled her eyes mockingly at Amber, "I guess you are just as easy as all the boys, and girls, for that matter, used to say."

Amber scoffed at her.

"What the-"

"She wants Sophie," he explained to Amber over his shoulder, "she wants her back."

"What?" Amber shook her head, "Why?"

"I don't know, but you can't have her, Brenda. She doesn't want to be with you." He tried not to let on that his voice was beginning to break.

Brenda pursed her lips, smirking at him.

"She doesn't know what she wants, she's a child. She needs to be told what she wants."

Corny felt the lump forming in his throat again, and he stepped away from the door and toward her, attempting to intimidate her with his size. She stood her ground, staring up at him.

"Just tell meâ€¦" he paused to compose himself, "why do you want her now? You hate her; you said you hated her in that letter. You've never treated her right; you never even wanted to be a mother. Why now?"

She gritted her teeth at him, her long eyelashes fluttering as she glanced back and forth between him and Amber. She sighed, and extended one skinny hand, throwing her fingers into the air.

"Jesus. Fine. It turns out that in order to get my money from the state, the child has to be actually living with me. Just saying that she belongs to me isn't enough, apparently."

They listened as she spoke, and when she finished, Amber let out a disgusted sigh, shifting slightly to one side and glancing at Corny, who glared angrily at Brenda.

"You only want her because of the money?" He felt himself beginning to tremble as she nodded stupidly at him.

"Well, yeah. Why the hell else would I want her? She's been nothing but a pain in the ass since the moment she was conceived." She glanced up at Corny, ignoring the rage in his face, and laughed out loud. "What, you thought I actually wanted that little demon? Please, Corny, I thought even you were smarter than that."

Amber took in a sharp breath of air behind him, and he pushed the tears that were beginning to form from anger and frustration behind his eyes, too irate to even think about giving Brenda the pleasure of tearing him down.

"You are detestable," he hissed the words at her, glinting against the sun to peer at her, "And as bad of a person as you are, you're an even worse mother. And I use that term loosely, you cold bitch."

He expected her to be shocked, even insulted at his words, but she continued to watch him with the self-satisfied smirk that had made her famous as a teenager. Her eyes shifted suddenly, and he heard a small voice behind all of them.

"Mama?" Sophie looked confusedly toward Corny, and then back to Brenda. "What are you doing here?"

She grimaced at the child.

"I've come to get you, come on, let's go." Brenda reached one cold hand out to pull the screen door open for her, and Amber moved quickly, grasping the handle before she could reach in and grab Sophie. Brenda glared at her. "Let go, you whore."

Amber shook her head, but didn't speak. She glanced worriedly toward Sophie, who was watching Corny with large, dark eyes.

"Daddy," she called out to him softly, "Daddy, don't let her take me. I don't wanna go with Mama; I wanna stay here with you."

He glanced back at her.

"Don't worry, baby, I won't." He looked towards Brenda, and began to move toward her again, though he wasn't sure why. Amber looked away from Sophie for only a moment, but that was enough time. Enough time for Brenda to move between them and grasp the child's wrist, pull her through the small gap in the door and onto the porch with her. Sophie

yelped in pain as Brenda dug her fingernails into her small, skinny wrist and held her close to her.

Corny cursed loudly, and reached for Sophie, who was now shooting terrified glances at all three of them.

"Damnit, Brenda! Stop it! Stop doing this to her!" Amber cried out as Sophie screamed at the pain of being torn between her mother and father, and the feeling of sharp fingernails digging into the sensitive skin of her wrists.

Brenda sneered at them.

"She's mine, damnit, and I'm taking her." Corny picked that moment to lash out at her, and Brenda retaliated, digging her one free hand into the skin of his face and dragging them down until five long, red scratches marred the perfect flesh. He cried out, and Amber moved quickly to push Brenda away, but her grasp on Sophie was too strong and in a moment Corny had grabbed the other of Sophie's arms. He and Brenda were now in a literal tug-of-war with her, and she screamed helplessly at being the victim of the war. With every squeal, every fresh outburst of pain coming from the child, his heart broke a little more. He wanted to hold her, wanted to keep her safe.

"Daddy! Help!" He could barely understand her through her tears, as they poured down her cheeks. "Don't let her take me, Daddy! Mama, stop it! I wanna stay with Daddy!"

"Shut up, you little demon, before I beat you to death!" Brenda's voice was rough, and harsh, but Corny wouldn't let go of her wrist, he couldn't. He couldn't bear to see her go.

"Brenda!" He was pleading with her now, and Amber was at his side, her eyes full of fresh tears and her hands clasped over her mouth. "Brenda, please. Please, I'm begging you. Don't do this to her. Don't do this to me. Please, please, don't take her from me. I love her."

There was a halt in the tugging, and just for a moment, he thought she would let go. He thought she would drop her, and he could gather her into his arms and kiss her, but no. Instead, she tugged harder, causing Corny to fall forward, thereby losing his grasp on her and allowing her to slip down the stairs, dragging the child behind her as she went.

Corny began to chase after her, his heart pounding in his chest. He couldn't hear anything except his daughter's cries, and the blood rushing to his head. He cried out to Brenda again, begging with her, but she didn't as much as pause. She was walking so fast that Sophie's feet couldn't keep up, and they began to skim the ground.

"Daddy!" She tried to turn, to look at him, but tears had blurred her vision to the point of partial blindness, "Daddy, I want to stay with you! Don't let her take me away! I wanna go to the zoo!" And then Brenda was pushing her into the car, forcing her head down, with Sophie still sobbing.

His feet carried him faster, and faster, until he was out of breath, but by the time he reached them, the car was driving away, faster

than his legs could ever have carried him; much further than he ever could have run.

And then, the car was gone. It had turned the corner, and left nothing but a trail of smoke behind. He hung his head, his heart beating rapidly, his lungs inflating and deflating in record time. He could still hear her cries, even over the bustle of the city, and right there, in the middle of the street, he let himself join her. The angry tears that had been burning his eyes finally managed to escape, and he felt his body racking with sobs at the thought of losing the little girl he'd become so attached to.

The worst part of it was, he had never even told her that he loved her.

16. End

****AHHH!!!!** I can't believe I finished it!! You guys have no idea how excited this makes me, I've NEVER finished a full length story before! I could just cry from happiness. Anyway, I wanted to THANK YOU guys SO much for all the AMAZING reviews and awesome feedback! I appreciate every single one of them, and I thank all of you for taking the time to read my story! I just love all of you, and I really hope you've enjoyed this story! This chapter is so sweet and fluffy it will make your teeth rot. I hope you like it and find that it was worth the wait! It makes me so happy to say that, without further adieu, here is the last chapter of A Smile Like yours!!!**

* * *

>He missed everything about her. The crooked little smile she gave him, the way her eyes wrinkled in the corners when she grinned, the way she reached out for his hand with her tiny fingers. He missed the way she would curl into his bed when she became frightened during the night; missed the way she always smelled of cinnamon and vanilla. Everything reminded him of her. He couldn't walk into the kitchen without remembering the way she would sit at the table, swinging her feet from the high chairs as she chattered happily over the breakfast he finally began to make her when she asked for it. He couldn't walk down the hallway without seeing the pink stain of the spot where she had dropped her ice cream cone, and the strawberry dessert had melted into the carpet. And though he had lived alone his entire life, and had never minded it, the house had suddenly never seemed quieter. It felt so empty. He hated everything; hated Brenda for being such a cold, heartless bitch, and he hated himself. Hated himself for falling in love with Sophie, hated himself for not doing more to stop Brenda from taking her from him.<p><p>

He stared at his reflection in the small mirror on the vanity table in the dressing room. Amber had given him his job back, though she'd ended up having to plead with him to take it. He hadn't been interested, not after Sophie had been taken, but she'd insisted, and it was where he was now, backstage, like he had been so many times before. He'd always looked into this mirror, and had always seen the same man; one who had been carefree, and more often than not, happy with his life. He had never worried about loving another person, never worried about the welfare of another human being. His eyes had been bright, his smile had been spectacular. And though it had only been a week since he had lost Sophie, even he could see that so much

had changed. He hadn't eaten, because he felt sick to his stomach at knowing that Brenda had his daughter, and was doing God knew what with her just to receive a few dollars per month in the mail. His cheeks were thinner, and dark circles underlined his eyes. He knew it would take more than make-up to pull off hosting this pageant.

There was a soft knock at the dressing room door, and when he didn't call out for the person to enter, Amber poked her head in.

"Hey," her voice was soft, "we go on in ten minutes. Are you okay?" She was tentative, and even with his current situation, he felt slightly guilty for making her feel so on-edge. She hadn't said it, but he knew that the scene she had witnessed at his house the week before had shaken her up, and she hadn't been the girl he had always known her to be. She was quiet, even withdrawn. It took all of the fun out of watching her squirm, and for the first time since she'd taken over as station manager, he didn't want to fight with her.

He felt himself nodding, and swallowed hard.

"Yeah," his voice was dry, and he knew that wouldn't cut it. Not today, not for this pageant. He needed to play it up, even if it was just for an hour or so. He cleared his throat, and looked away from her for a moment before glancing up at her again. "I'm fine." He put on the smile that would have to fool the world, and though Amber tried to hide the pain in her eyes, she failed. She disappeared from the room and he sat, watching his reflection in the mirror as he heard her high heels clicking through the halls.

By the time he was twenty minutes into the show, he thought he might break down at any given moment. Since none of the girls knew what had happened between him and Brenda, they continued to watch him with shifty, cautious glares, and he wanted to shake them. He wanted to grab them by their shoulders and make them realize that he wasn't looking for a cheap lay. All of the music, all of the dance steps they had practiced a million times, it all reminded him of Sophie. It reminded him that if he'd taken better care of her, or if they had left for the zoo one moment earlier, she'd still be his. She'd be sitting in the audience right now, and watching the show. She'd be laughing and smiling, and he'd be able to look into her face, and know that when he went home, he would still have her.

He tried to announce the girls with as much vivacity as he always had; tried to clap encouragingly for each of the performers, and give each of them the biggest, brightest smile he could manage. None of them knew that behind the façade, he was dying. None of them, save Amber, Inez, and Maybelle, knew that his heart was completely broken. Only the three of them knew that he was living on the memories of what his life had been like, if only for the shortest period of time.

He watched the girls dance, but he didn't see them. He remembered Sophie, and the way she had danced the few times he had brought her to the studio. The way she had run towards him enthusiastically, her arms outstretched, making her look like a ballerina. She had wanted to dance, then, and he had stopped her because he was in a rush to get home. He was always in a rush. A rush for work, a rush for home, a rush for bedtime. He suddenly wished that he had spent less time rushing and more time enjoying the company of the child he had taken

for granted for so long.

By the time they were halfway into the show, the producer called a commercial break, and he let his feet carry him away from the stage, and into the desolate hallways. He swallowed hard, forcing the angry tears back, pressing a fist to his mouth to keep himself quiet. He hated this, in every sense of the word. He hated feeling so unusually vulnerable, and hated knowing that as bad as he had it, Sophie was a million times worse.

He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, and turned quickly to see Amber, who was clutching a clipboard in the hand that wasn't touching him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" She looked worried, and he nodded.

"I'm fine."

She wanted to hold him suddenly; she had wanted to for a week now, since she'd shown up on his porch and begged him to take his job back. But this was so much different; it was no longer a carnal type of desire, it was the need to be comforted; the feeling of being wanted by another person. She had known for so long what it was like to be so desperately alone, and she wanted to comfort him, but he wouldn't let his guard down, even for her. She'd offered to stay with him after the incident, but he'd refused, he'd told her that he'd be okay. He didn't realize she could see the redness in his eyes, the splotchy aftermath of what tears did to a person's face. He, of course, hadn't told her that he'd been crying, so she'd pretended not to notice. But that's all it was; pretending.

The buzzer sounded, and everyone scattered back to their spots. He regained his stance at his podium, and continued to let his fingers tap the rhythm of the music, continued to let himself bob his head, trying to convince himself, and everyone else, that he was fine. He was the same Corny Collins who had stood here for nearly ten years, and everyone seemed to be buying it. There were moments though, when he would catch the look in Amber's eyes, that made him want to give up. Made him want to throw the towel in, walk off the stage, and never look back. Moments that made him remember that this stupid show wasn't the most important thing in the world.

Sometime during the last council girl's dance, he began to hear Sophie; began to hear her cries, begging him not to let Brenda take her. Screaming his name, over, and over again, tears streaming down her face as she was forced into the car against her will. He should have done more. He should have called the police, should have tried to run faster, harder. He shouldn't have given up so easily. Sophie would have never given up on him, or anything else she believed in. It wasn't fair that he had done it to her.

He closed his eyes for just a moment, just to compose himself, but the voices grew louder. They were pounding in his head now, threatening to drive him out of his mind. He let his hands continue to tap on the podium, as if he were simply trying to get into the rhythm. He heard her cries again, and swallowed hard, finally opening his eyes to glance over at Amber, for the moral support he so desperately craved.

But Amber wasn't looking at him; her eyes were focused on something

that was happening backstage, though he couldn't see what. He saw her move quickly, and she disappeared from sight, though he was the only one who seemed to notice. The music continued to blare, and the girls continued to dance. He moved his head quickly, in a desperate attempt to see what was happening, but he couldn't see where Amber had gone.

There were shrieks suddenly, and the music continued to play, but most of the girls had stopped paying attention. Their eyes began to look toward the wings of the stage, and the audience fell into a quiet stupor. He leaned against the podium, pushing himself up to see what was drawing everyone's attention, and gasped suddenly.

He could hear her. He could hear Sophie, crying, screaming. Was he going crazy? The noises seemed to be getting louder, and it was almost deafening. And then, suddenly, he saw the two familiar dark heads bobbing near the side of the stage, and he sucked his breath in. Amber was racing towards them suddenly, her feet were moving so quickly that he thought she might fall. The brunette woman looked up at him, and he realized she was holding the hand of a small girl.

"Corny, come get this little brat!" Brenda's voice belted over the music, and before he even realized it, he was racing down from his place behind his podium, his feet carrying him faster than he thought possible. By the time he got close enough to her, Brenda was shoving the child as hard as she could, towards him, and her tiny feet raced to him, her arms outstretched.

He grabbed her in one swift motion and swung her into his arms, holding her so tightly against him as she sobbed, her tiny fingers clutching the back of his neck. He squeezed her, closing his eyes, burying his head into the tiny nape of her neck. He tried to steady her body as she wept against him, clinging to him with such force that he never wanted to let go; never wanted to release her again.

"Oh, Jesus, get a room," Brenda rolled her eyes at them, and turned to go, but he called out to her quickly. He suddenly no longer cared that they were on the air as Sophie continued to whimper against his shoulder, wrapping her thin legs around his waist.

"Why did you bring her back?" He had to know, if for no other reason than to thank God for it. His arms still held her tightly, her soft hair brushing his cheek.

Brenda shook her head, and let herself begin to walk away.

"She's not worth the money I was getting for her." And she was suddenly gone.

Corny clutched the back of her head, holding it to him, hushing her as she cried.

"It's okay," he felt himself saying the words to her, and meaning them, "Daddy's got you now, you're okay, baby."

"Don't let her take me again, Daddy!" she was whining softly now, but still clutching him with a death grip, "I don't want her to."

"She's not going to," he cradled her in his arms, rocking her back and forth, just like he had that day in the parking lot, "She's never going to get you again."

They stood that way for a moment, and when he finally looked up, Amber was watching him, her eyes wide. He wasn't exactly sure what to do; the music had stopped, and everyone was looking at them. Suddenly, he knew exactly what needed to be done.

He cleared his throat, and the studio fell into a hush.

"I have an announcement to make," he swallowed hard, and Sophie pulled her head up to look at him, her face red and stained from crying. He wanted to reach out and wipe her tears away, the tiny ones that still traced the length of her small nose, but his hands were too busy holding her against him. "This is Sophie, and she's my daughter."

She sighed happily in his arms, cuddling into his chest as the people in the studio began to chatter excitedly. Some of the girls on stage crinkled their noses at him, disgusted at the prospect of his sleeping with a former council girl, but the majority of them whispered excitedly to one another, grinning at the sight of him holding Sophie. He caught Amber's grin in the corner of his eye, and let himself smile at her. Sophie wrapped her tiny arms around him, her mouth suddenly next to his ear.

"Daddy, aren't you still on TV?"

Right, that. He nodded, and carried her with him back to the podium, placing her on top of it so that she sat facing him. He felt no further explanation was necessary to any of them, and slowly, the show resumed. Sophie turned slightly, to watch the girls dance, but he was no longer looking at them. He couldn't take his eyes off of the little girl's face.

By the time the show was over and they had crowned a new winner, he couldn't stop grinning like a fool. He suddenly wanted to be out of this studio, wanted to take Sophie out, buy her a toy box full of toys, buy her anything she wanted. Wanted her to start being a child. Wanted to be the one to give her that childhood. But he had other things to take care of, first.

He carried Sophie on his hip to where Amber stood near a camera man, chatting with him about the angles they would need to start using the following Monday, with the new dances. He stood silently for a moment, and when the man walked away, he cleared his throat, and she turned, smiling at them.

"Oh my God!" She grinned happily at them, "You got her, Corny. You got your baby back." She let a hand reach up to gently stroke the small of Sophie's back. "Are you happy to be with your Daddy again?"

"Very much so," Sophie smiled fully at her, and let an arm reach around to pat Amber's shoulder. "I'm happy to see you, too, Amber."

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat as she looked at Corny

again, the blush in her cheeks becoming evident as she studied their smiling faces. She wet her lips suddenly, and let herself chew on her bottom lip for a moment before speaking.

"So how about that date now?" She wasn't sure how she'd mustered up enough courage to speak the words to him, but she had, and he grinned at her.

"You're asking me out on a date? It's about time, huh?" He glanced at Sophie, who nodded affirmatively.

"I think she's ready to get laid," Sophie said bluntly, and Amber covered her mouth, trying to hide the outburst of laughter. Corny turned to his daughter quickly.

"What did I tell you about using language like that, missy?" He sounded so fatherly so quickly that it warmed Amber's heart.

"I don't even know what it means!" Sophie offered innocently, "I just heard Ma-Brenda say it. That's what I call her now," she explained at the confused look on their faces.

Corny turned back to Amber slowly.

"Well, you know," he smiled, and studied Sophie's face for a moment, "If you are asking me out on a date, I think you should know that I come with some baggage, and I'm not looking for something that I don't think will last."

Amber twisted the toe of her shoe on the ground, her face blushing as she looked back up at them.

"Well," she sighed, smiling up at Sophie, "I guess I won't mind sharing you with another woman. She is pretty cute."

Sophie grinned back at her, and Amber raised her chin suddenly, her blue eyes sparkling as she spoke to her.

"What do you think, Sophie? Where should the three of us go on our first date?"

Sophie smiled softly, scrunching her face up in concentration.

"The zoo would be fun." She watched Amber as she contemplated the words in her mind, and expected her to refuse. Mama would never have let her come on a date with her and one of her grown-up boyfriends.

Amber smiled warmly at her, raising her fingers to tickle the child's sides softly. Corny watched her, wanting to kiss her suddenly.

"I think the zoo sounds amazing."

He let himself move towards her, his lips covering Amber's in an instant, and he felt her return the kiss before pulling away slightly.

"Don't worry," he grinned against Amber's lips, whispering the words, "You're still getting that spanking later."

End
file.